

**Social Aerial Circus:**  
**Female Experience, Self-perception and Self-representation**

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**The thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Portsmouth**

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### **Declaration**

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

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## **Abstract**

Women are often asked to conform to a rigid set of heteronormative ideas of femininity within a culture that values women based on appearance. Images of women are prevalent in current media and online culture and can contribute to enforcing these normative ideals and feelings of insufficiency. Historically, the female aerialist's muscularity challenged traditional stereotypes of female inferiority, displaying nuanced representations of femininity. Current research in social circus indicates that participation in circus activities can increase participants' self-confidence and self-belief.

This is a practice-based research enquiry combined with participant-based studies that explores a group of eighteen to thirty-five year old women's experience of learning aerial circus skills integrated with training in digital media production within a social circus context. As a circus performer and instructor this research emerges from over ten years of practitioner experience. It features two participant studies in which I taught participants aerial circus skills and facilitated workshops in photography, videography and graphic design. Parallel to these studies I explored participant experience and theory through physical movement and aerial performance. The practice research presented in this thesis, a performance seminar, vocal aerial silks performance and multi-media installation event, enabled reflection upon practitioner identity in relation to participant experience to tell this collective narrative.

The findings indicate the potency of social aerial circus training and performance to enable participants to find satisfaction in their bodies, increase their self-confidence and engage in fantasies of freedom and alterity. The combination of aerial circus with digital media production enabled participants to play with ideas of self-image through the fantasy implicit in both disciplines. The use of digital media consolidated participants' experience of aerial circus and enabled a form of digital self-representation. Through this creative process participants were able to disentangle some of the contradictions central to female identity in late modernity.

## **A Vocal Aerial Performance**

### **Exploring Female Identities Through Social Aerial Circus and Digital Media, June 2019**

Hold, balance, hang, touch, climb, breath, hold, stay, fall, prep, hold, stretch, embrace, miss, keep, lose, support, touch, climb, spin, twist, drop, fly, melt, sweat, laugh, press, bend, fold, hold.

Breath, voice, body, movement. My body influencing my voice.

The strain in my voice as I drop, as I twist, as I fold, as I hold.

The use of the voice, the breath, the effort in the body, vocalised.

A re-articulation of words. Repetition. Repetition. Doing words. Things the body does.

Things my body does. Things participants' bodies do. Repetition.

The voice, the fabric, the materiality of the text, ingrained, inscribed upon the fabric, inscribed upon my body, the sweat, the resin, the build-up of bodily residue sticking to the equipment, to my skin, alongside the words, the voice.

This was an emotional performance for me, for participants.

**(C.Watt *diary*)**

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The practice research performance *Be My (Body) Guest* took place at the Brighton Spiegel Tent 21st May 2018 produced by the University of Brighton as part of their AHRC-funded research project XR Circus which explored new methodologies to support new and diverse immersive and interactive performances using the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of circus as a stimulus and focus. The *Bending Over Backwards* practice research performance was part of social circus group B.Collective's BandBazi 'Friday' show, performed in Brighton 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2018 in partnership with Brighton & Hove City Council and Irene Mensah, directed by Alfa Marks and produced by Philippa Vafadari.

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## Dissemination

Presentation delivered at the international conference 'Cirque de Demain', Paris, France (27/1/2017)

Participation in the Roundhouse and Upswing's 'Creative Exchange for Circus Directors and Makers' 5-day programme, London, UK (18 – 22/4/2017)

Presentation delivered at the University of Portsmouth, Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, 'Postgraduate Research Student Conference', Portsmouth, UK (14/6/2017)

Paper delivered at the 4-day international conference 'Imagineers in Circus and Science: Scientific Knowledge and Creative Imagination', Canberra, Australia (04/04/2018)

Presentation delivered at the University of Portsmouth, Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, 'Research and Innovation Conference', Portsmouth, UK (26/06/2018)

Selected as one of the artists on the AHRC-funded research project 'XR Circus', led by the University of Brighton, which explored new methodologies to support new and diverse immersive and interactive performances using the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of circus as a stimulus and focus. Practice research piece *Be My (Body) Guest* performed at the XR Circus showcase event at the Brighton Spiegel Tent, Brighton, UK (21/05/2018).

Poster presentation and *Be My (Body) Guest* video and 360-degree video experience showcased at the PONToon project interim event, Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, UK (06/12/2018)

Exhibition of *Be My (Body) Guest* video and 360-degree video experience displayed at the 'UK Immersive Pitch and Demo at South by Southwest', Austin, USA (21/03/2019)

Poster presentation at the University of Portsmouth, Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, 'Research and Innovation Conference', Portsmouth, UK (18/06/2019)

Short reflective journal article: Watt, C. (2020). *Be My (Body) Guest: A self-reflective account of digital social practice. Journal of Science & Popular Culture*, 3(1), 109 – 117.

## **Also Submitted as Part of This Thesis**

### **Exploring Female Identities Through Social Aerial Circus and Digital Media**

Performance seminar, vocal aerial performance and multi-media installation created and performed by Carolyn Watt, technical support provided by University of Portsmouth technicians Greg Smith, Russ Percy and Jack Doggrell.

This work was examined at the University of Portsmouth, White Swan building, Studio 6, 26th June 2019.

This final piece of practice research is the primary element to be viewed in conjunction with reading the thesis, the following video is included as a supporting document and submitted with this thesis:

Video link (appendix 1): <https://cawatt.wixsite.com/cwattphd/finalpracticeresearch>

This video can also be found on the accompanying memory stick (in the back sleeve) in folder number 1.

## Introduction

I think there are just so many pressures, your height, your weight, your ethnicity, your hair colour, you know, you can't grow grey gracefully, even though that's what I've decided I'm going to do now: throw it to the wind! Whether you want to have children, whether you want a career, whether you want to be a stay at home mum, there's all these expectations on you ... everyone just has an opinion I think about what a woman has to do, you know, with her body, with her mind, with you know, her career, her life. The choices that she makes I think are highly, much more highly criticised. (Lucy, personal communication, January 2019)

Amy Shields Dobson, whose research explores gender and sexuality in digital culture, argues that 'young women are called to present their identities in line with the girl-powered neoliberal ideals' (2015, p. 40). She says that such ideals ask women to present themselves 'as strong, confident and capable ... in contrast to earlier models of weak femininity' (Dobson, 2015, p. 29). Historically, the female aerialist can be seen to represent ideas of female strength and power challenging traditional notions of female inferiority (Tait, 2005a). Existing scholarship indicates participation in social circus activities can increase feelings of self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of belonging (Cadwell, 2018; Spiegel & Parent, 2017; Spiegel et al., 2015; Bolton, 2004). Yet little is known about the female experience of aerial circus within a social circus context and these fields have yet to be connected to media and online culture. Although research has been conducted on the impact of social circus participation, this phenomenon has not been explored through a practice-based approach. This study combines practice research with participant-based studies to explore ideas of female self-perception and identity through the combination of socially engaged aerial circus and digital self-representation, referred to as social aerial circus throughout this thesis. This practice-based research study discusses a group of eighteen to thirty-five year old women's experiences of learning aerial circus skills integrated with training in digital media production skills within the field of social circus. I use the term digital media described as 'a blend of technology and content' (Centre for Digital Media, 2019) to define my use of digital media in this study. Digital media encompass the types of technologies and content participants engaged with (video, photography, blogging, graphic design) and my use of digital within practice research performances (audio, video, projection and live streaming). The use of the image, already implicated in ideologies of femininity with regard to visual and beauty culture through popular images of women and perceptions women have of themselves, is integral to

exploring ideas of femininity and self-perception. Through this thesis and accompanying practice research I offer an aerial circus practitioners' perspective, both performer and instructor, combined with participants' voices.

I led two participant studies where I taught volunteer participants aerial circus skills and facilitated workshops such as photography, videography and graphic design integrated within the aerial circus training programme. The first study took place July – October 2017 and the second study July 2018 – February 2019. Both studies were analysed through a qualitative approach combining observation, surveys, group discussions and semi-structured interviews with participants. I developed my practice research throughout November 2016 – June 2019 in response to and in dialogue with the participant studies by experimenting with my aerial circus training, performance and exploring ideas of digital media integrated with performance. Practice research enabled me to explore theory through the body and I used an autoethnographic approach to reflect upon my practice in relation to participant experience. Theatre scholar Megan Alrutz, in her text *Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth*, discusses her experience of seeing herself 'in and through someone else's digital story' (2015, p. xiii). She explains that 'thinking about their perspectives helped me see how and why I move through the world in my particular way' (Alrutz, 2015, p. xiii). In a similar vein, understanding participants' experiences of aerial circus and media and online culture enabled me to understand my own experiences of practice. By interacting with participants, discussing their experiences during interviews and group sessions, and observing their training progress I was reminded of my ten-year journey and earlier experiences of aerial circus training and performance. I explored these experiences through different iterations of practice research performance culminating in the final practice research event: a performance seminar, vocal aerial silks performance and multi-media installation. The event *Exploring Female Identities Through Social Aerial Circus and Digital Media* was presented live for examination at the University of Portsmouth on the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2019. This event enabled a connection of scholarship and artistic practice through physical performance and drew together a variety of qualitative data gathered over the course of the project incorporating multiple layers of knowledge in the form of video, still image, audio recordings, participant interviews and text. The event took the form of a multi-media installation format with the projection of multiple videos and images on to different surfaces within the studio space and participant quotations printed and embroidered onto aerial silks and displayed for audience members to touch

and read. This was combined with a performance seminar and live aerial silks performance integrating spoken word as I performed aerial movement whilst simultaneously vocalising participant quotations. The video documentation of this event is submitted as part of this thesis providing an account of this performative outcome. This thesis is to be read alongside and in conjunction with viewing the final practice research event video available online (appendix 1) or via the accompanying memory stick (back sleeve) which forms the foundation of the contribution to knowledge.

Dance psychotherapist and researcher Beatrice Allegranti discusses embodiment as an ever-changing process, which evolves through one's lived experiences (2011/2015, p. 2). She emphasises the importance 'of *finding* the body' (Allegranti, 2011/2015, p. 92, emphasis in original) as a necessary step in achieving body ownership and argues it 'is perhaps the way forward in terms of acknowledging that, as women, we have lost control of our bodies in patriarchal culture' (2011/2015, p. 92). I use the term embodiment throughout this thesis to engage with Allegranti's notion of embodiment as a combination of physical, psychological and social life experiences as part of an on-going process of becoming (2011/2015, p. 2). Thus, my practice aims to distribute embodied forms of knowledge developed as a result of this research process, alongside the written word which, as described by theatre and performance scholar Robin Nelson in the article *Practice-as-research and the Problem of Knowledge*, aims to 'make the 'tacit knowledge' explicit' (2006, p. 112, emphasis in original). Nelson discusses the creation of knowledge through doing and, in relation to an example of dance, he argues that 'dissemination of that knowledge can at best only be partially undertaken in words' (2006, p. 107). So, I adopt the combined approach of photographic and video documentation alongside the written thesis to discuss and articulate the embodied knowledge developed as a result of this study. Throughout this thesis I present corresponding threads in the form of: participant quotations, reflective accounts of my practice research, video and still image to discuss the collective narrative developed. The ideas discussed in this thesis are presented not only through the written word, but through aerial performance and video documentation. I found an embodied approach offered an opportunity to interrogate my thinking and reflect upon participants' lived experience of social aerial circus training and performance.

## Funding Framework and Research Aims

This study has emerged from my long-term practice and is supported by a larger European Union funded project entitled PONToon. The PONToon project aims to upskill women in digital technology skills, recognising a digital skills shortage amongst citizens of Europe (House of Commons, 2016) and is engaged with not only Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs) but also digital media technologies. The PONToon project seeks to investigate ideas of empowerment through the development of increased digital and social competencies leading to better access to employment opportunities and participation in the labour market. The PONToon project works with women aged eighteen to thirty-five considered by the project as socially excluded and disadvantaged as a result of their gender. Carlota Quirós et al., in the European Commission report *Women in the Digital Age*, indicate that gender inequality in the digital domain is partly a consequence of ‘unconscious biases about what is appropriate and what capacities each gender has, as well as about the technologies themselves’ (2018, p. 0). Quirós et al. continue to state that there is a need to increase women’s levels of self-confidence in their capabilities in order to address the digital divide (2018, p. 11). The PONToon project uses creative disciplines such as performance and fashion to engage participants with digital skills acquisition.

Building on my practitioner experience, I designed and delivered a programme that engaged women with digital media production skills at the same time as developing self-confidence through social aerial circus training and performance. The concept of a social aerial circus and digital skills training programme, created as a result of this study, contributed to the PONToon project’s aim to develop transferable digital engagement methods and informed PONToon project workshops<sup>1</sup>. This study, developed as a result of practitioner experience, evolved in response to working with participants to move beyond the agenda of the PONToon project to question if social aerial circus training and performance impacts on participants’ self-perception. As is typical with practice-based research, the study morphed over the course of the process and provided an opportunity to explore insights through practice. This study provided an opportunity for me to examine the combination of social aerial circus training and performance with digital self-representation and to reflect upon the process and outcomes. What was revealed was an exploration of female identity and self-image, where the use of the digital image, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on the contribution to the PONToon project can be found in appendix 9.

form of photographs, posters and videos, evolved as a method for exploring performer and participant experience.

### **Drawing Upon Personal Experience**

The origins of this study lie in ten years of experience as a cabaret circus performer and instructor. Sociologist Tanya Bunsell, in her text *Strong and Hard Women: An ethnography of female bodybuilding*, cites Gelsthorpe and Morris (1990) to argue the necessity of beginning with personal experience when undertaking a feminist approach (2013, p. 1). Like Bunsell, my introduction draws upon personal experience and offers some biographical information in order to explain the study background. I remember my early experiences of circus as a young girl watching female performers with their flesh on display in revealing costumes and spectacular acrobatic aerial demonstrations of grace, glamour and power. These early experiences correlated to participants' perceptions of the female aerialist as representative of fantasy and femininity but also strength and control. In each instance the female performers depicted strong women, physically strong in their performance feats, but also, exuding self-confidence. I perceived these women as unafraid to display their bodies, unashamed to be looked at. At the time I did not know that it might be possible to learn circus skills myself; I had always assumed such skills remained within circus families. I began aerial circus training in my early twenties with little previous experience of performance, gymnastics or circus training. Like many of this study's participants I initially took up aerial circus as a fitness activity, to increase my self-confidence and meet new people. Initially I began with one class per week which increased over the years as my interest grew and I began to perform and teach. I now perform aerial silks, aerial hoop, contortion and partner acrobatics primarily at cabaret events, club nights, private events and circus little tops. My circus training and performance have always been additional to education and employment and this study has provided an opportunity to bring together these two sides of my identity. Between November 2016 to October 2019 I attended over twenty-five circus, cabaret and digital performance events and have continued to teach recreational aerial circus and flexibility classes part-time throughout this research process. I also continued to perform part-time across numerous circus, cabaret and nightlife events, which although not specific to my practice research is inherently interconnected as my circus body is always with me. My circus body is the body I have trained for over ten years through repetitive physical activity in order to achieve my

performance feats and develop my instructor knowledge. My circus body is how I identify myself as a circus practitioner. It is the same body that moves through this research process: moving between my desk research, working with participants, undertaking practice research and in my commercial performance.

I acknowledge my investment in this research as a female performer and product of recreational aerial circus training which motivates this study. It could be argued that this study is biased due to the primarily qualitative and subjective nature of both my own and participants' accounts of experience. However, feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz in the text *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) argues for the obligation to consider women's opinions, feelings and experiences in order to develop knowledge relevant to the female body. Similarly, Bunsell suggests that 'it is important that feminist theory takes into account real, fleshy, corporeal bodies' (2013, p. 161) as I do here. Both Grosz and Bunsell's arguments emphasise the need to authentically represent female experience that has previously been excluded from knowledge production (Spry, 2001; Coleman, 2009; Grosz, 1994; Young, 2005). Through this thesis I contribute a feminist practitioner's perspective exploring the impact of social aerial circus training and performance on female self-perception. My approach does not assume a 'universal female body' (Conboy, Medina, Stanbury, 1997, p. 3) by which I acknowledge that experiences may differ dependent on social and political identities. I do not suggest the experiences discussed to be representative of all female aerialists. However, I discuss a specific group of women's lived experiences alongside my own, located in the south coast of the UK within late modernity.

## **Research Context**

Throughout this thesis I engage with ideas of 'lived experience' as discussed by feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young who argues that 'The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation' (2005, p. 16). Young, in her text *On Female Body Experience "Throwing Like A Girl" and Other Essays*, discusses the lived body as 'always layered with social and historical meaning' (2005, p. 7) and emphasises 'women's experiences as lived and felt in the flesh' rather than merely being viewed as objects (2005, p. 7). I also build upon Bunsell's argument that 'Bodies are always constructed within a cultural context and can never be disentangled from the discourse in which the body operates' (2013, p. 72). Taking Young's notion of lived experience as a means to explore the body within social structures (2005)



and Bunsell's emphasis on the body as situated within a cultural context (2013), it is useful to discuss the social setting of late modernity which this study navigates and which frames participants' and my lived experiences of aerial circus training and performance.

Anita Harris, in a discussion of contemporary girlhood in her text *Future Girl: young women in the twenty-first century*, describes late modernity as having a 'new focus on enterprise, economic rationalism ... as well as a new emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals' (2004, p. 4). Harris argues that this focus of late modernity creates 'a sense of change, insecurity, fragmentation, and discontinuity within communities and nations' (2004, p. 4). Published in 2004 Harris' text describes much of my lived experiences through my adolescent years and early adulthood. Harris discusses young women's position within late modernity and the 'contrasting narratives' of the "can-do" or "at-risk" girls' (2004, p. 10, emphasis in original). Harris indicates the notion 'that good choices, effort, and ambition alone are responsible for success that has come to separate the can-dos from the at-risks' (2004, p. 16) but highlights that it is the inequality of opportunities for young women in late modernity (2004, p. 16) that creates this divide in reality. She describes the 'can-do girls' to be considered as 'optimistic, self-inventing, and success-orientated' (Harris, 2004, p. 25). The 'at-risk girls' however, 'are those who are seen to be rendered vulnerable by their circumstances ... Structural disadvantage is recast as poor personal choices, laziness, and incompetent family practices' (Harris, 2004, p. 25). This idea that personal choice can separate the 'can-dos' from the 'at-risks' is representative of neoliberal values which places emphasis on individualism and self-responsibility for the direction of one's life, successes and failures (Harris, 2004, p. 151 – 152). It is useful to consider Harris' groupings of young women in her discussion of contemporary girlhood to locate the participants of this study. Harris identifies 'three broad groupings: first, young women from economically secure, professional, and successful families; second, those from the lower-middle to working classes; and third, those in lower-working-class or "underclass" circumstances' (2004, p. 45, emphasis in original). Taking into consideration Harris' categories, the participants who volunteered for this study fall within the first two groups. The women who volunteered to participate were primarily in employment or further education and a mix of university staff, students, former students, public service employees or creative entrepreneurs. The women who volunteered to participate in the study could be considered as Harris' 'can-do girls' (2004). These participants self-identified that furthering their digital media production skills could be beneficial to their career

progression and recognised aerial circus training as advantageous to their health and fitness. These were women who were comfortable entering a university building and took it upon themselves to engage in what could be considered as a self-development project.

As a framework for this study, I draw on Young's notion of femininity as 'a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves' (1977/2005, p. 31). Ideas of femininity are not necessarily a result of the material body, but a combination of constructions within cultural settings where the body and cultural location are intertwined. Bunsell argues that 'The feminine ideal in Western society is to be beautiful, small, thin and *weak*, compared to the male ideal, which possesses physical power, presence, strength, size and aggression' (2013, p. 110, emphasis original). Conversely, feminist philosopher Susan Bordo says in her chapter *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity* that, in order to participate in the economic market, women 'must also learn to embody the "masculine" language and values of [the professional] arena – self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on' (1993/1997, p. 96, emphasis in original). This illustrates the contradictory expectations of women to represent themselves in line with the heteronormative feminine ideal, but also to possess attributes typically considered as masculine in order to participate in late modernity. These ideas of performing both masculinity and femininity were theorised by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere in her seminal paper 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', where she described womanliness as 'worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it' (1929, p. 303). British cultural theorist and feminist Angela McRobbie argues that femininity is 'a thin tightrope to walk, it asks of girls that they perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men' (2009, p. 84). McRobbie's circus metaphor is particularly apt in describing the careful balancing act of self-representation women often feel they must perform in presenting themselves in line with the Western feminine ideal, but to also participate in late modernity through individualism, the workforce and consumer culture (McRobbie, 2009, p. 5 -9). Sociologist Chris Shilling argues that 'The more people attach value to how we look and what we do with our bodies, the greater the pressures for people's self-identities to become wrapped up with their bodies' (2003, p. 109 - 110). Perceptions of self-identity can become entangled in a combination of aesthetic focus with the pressures of participating in late modernity. In a discussion of middle-class and upper-

middle class women and eating disorders Bordo argues that these are women 'living in periods poised on the edge of gender change, women who have the social and material resources to carry the traditional construction of femininity to symbolic excess but who also confront the anxieties of new possibilities' (1993/1997, p. 99). Bordo's proposal here is valuable in considering late modernity as a period where concepts and expectations of gender are undergoing change. Bordo's point also indicates that those who may be considered as middle-class, such as this study's participants, have the resources available to them to challenge and explore these new gender possibilities.

Circus within the UK operates within these ideas of late modernity, self-invention and self-responsibility. Similarly, circus performers must navigate heteronormative aesthetic ideals and expectations of the female body. Performing arts scholar Peta Tait describes aerial performance as 'a physical art created with the body, and although widely performed in theatres, is generally associated with circus' (2005a, p. 1). Aerial circus encompasses a range of specialisms within circus that see acrobatic movement performed on an apparatus rigged at height, such as aerial silks (also known as tissue or fabric), hoop (also known as lyra), rope (also known as *corde lisse*) and trapeze. Aerial circus has become an increasingly popular recreational and leisure activity as illustrated by the growing number of evening and weekend classes on offer (for example see Firetoys, 2019), as indicated by performance scholar and aerialist Katrina Carter (2014, p. 62). It is also growing as a professional pursuit, with an increase in university level degrees in circus performance now available (for example, the National Centre for Circus Arts, UK, 2019; Circomedia, UK, 2019) and circus skills increasingly included within performing arts courses (for example, the University of Chichester, UK, 2016; University of South Wales, UK, 2016). Although there are now a number of publications and research projects exploring aerial circus and social circus (see Tait, 2005a; Holmes, 2016; Carter, 2014; Bessone, 2017a; Sorzano, 2018a; Cadwell, 2018), female lived experience in these domains is yet to be investigated through a practice-based approach.

Social circus is a global phenomenon and evolved simultaneously with the development of contemporary circus in the mid – late 20<sup>th</sup> century and often works with marginalised or youth groups. Within social circus initiatives the emphasis is not on the development of technical performance skills, but on the process and participation itself. Stephen Cadwell, social circus practitioner and scholar, says that 'Social circus can be thought of as an umbrella term for the use of circus arts in any caring, supportive or

therapeutic setting' (2018, p. 22). Cadwell's definition differentiates social circus from professional circus training and performance and draws similarities to community-based arts and sporting initiatives. Circus educator and researcher Ilaria Bessone indicates that social circus 'can be inscribed within the tradition of informal art-education, in which individual and community development is fostered through practical, sporting or artistic activities' (2017b, p. 656). She states that this approach is 'underpinned by the belief that artistic practices enable participants to experience new ways of being' (Bessone, 2017b, p. 656). Bessone's discussion indicates the potential of social circus as a site to explore participants' lived experiences and ideas of self-perception through creative physical practice. Much social circus research discusses the benefits of participation such as increased self-esteem and personal transformation with marginalised groups (Lavers, 2016; Cadwell, 2018; Lafortune & Bouchard, 2011). Social circus initiatives often work within specific social settings and with different at-risk groups such as with young people living on the street (Lavers, 2018, p. 508, p. 519), 'women survivors of violence, prison inmates and refugees to the physically disabled' (Lafortune & Bouchard, 2011, p. 3). Although this study does not work specifically with an at-risk group of participants, it does focus on the use of aerial circus skills in a supportive and nurturing context and considers the social setting within which participants' experiences take place.

To further understand social circus within the social setting of late modernity within this study I draw upon theatre scholar Jennifer Beth Spiegel's article *Social Circus: The Cultural Politics of Embodying "Social Transformation"* (2016). Spiegel argues that the contradictory nature of social circus is 'contextualized as a means of supporting individuals and communities in pursuit of their own goals' (2016, p. 52), yet at the same time the focus on social inclusion encourages 'integration' (2016, p. 59) into late modernity, characterised by neoliberal ideals such as 'self-expression and self-disclosure' (2016, p. 52). Spiegel's argument here is valuable in suggesting social circus initiatives could be considered as working with those considered as 'at-risk' (Harris, 2004) with the aim to produce 'can-dos' (Harris, 2004) to participate in the economy. Spiegel continues to describe social circus as:

a movement that navigates the tensions of a process aimed to attain goals and building skills for surviving neoliberal system collapse, and the imperative to forge one's own path, since jobs and socioeconomic support systems as they have historically been conceived are dwindling. (2016, p. 52)

Both Harris (2004, p. 113) and Spiegel (2016, p. 52) describe social training initiatives, such as social circus, as providing temporary spaces of support for youth and marginalised persons in the absence of education and employment opportunities. Harris, like Spiegel above, draws attention to the lack of established jobs in the current economy and argues that skill development alone will not create the jobs needed (2004, p. 113). In addition to this, drawing similarities to Spiegel's analysis of social circus, Harris argues that such skill training initiatives 'contribute to a powerful discourse of personal responsibility for joining the ranks of the successful' (2004, p. 114). Spiegel's alternative perspective on social circus highlights the social context within which the present study navigates. This study goes beyond Spiegel's research to combine her analysis with observations derived from practice research to consider ideas of female identity. Nelson, in his chapter *Modes of Practice-as-Research Knowledge and Their Place in the Academy*, says that 'research into performance may be insightful in unpacking the operation of cultural codes and conventions to reveal how social reality is constructed and knowledge is legitimated and circulated in the performance of everyday life' (2009, p. 123). Practice research, combined with the participant-based approach, enables me to interrogate the potential of social aerial circus in considering female lived experience through physical movement and performance.

### **Practice Research and Thesis Format**

Practice research as a method is central to my analysis. It is through physical movement that I problematise and explore participant experience. Taking the circus body as a site of research is one of the methods by which I consider the theories discussed throughout this thesis. Dance theorist Camilla Damkjaer, in her text *Homemade Academic Circus: Idiosyncratically Embodied Explorations into Research in the Arts and Circus*, engages in practice-based research to physically learn circus arts that she had previously only understood theoretically (2016). She highlights that much circus research to date focuses on historical enquiry or contemporary circus (Damkjaer, 2016, p. 31) and argues that artistic research can offer an alternative interior perspective rather than 'the exterior position of the researcher' (2016, p. 35). Damkjaer continues, in a discussion of her practice-based circus research, to argue that 'the subjective experience is the only way to access' (2016, p. 40) this embodied knowledge. A practice-based approach, combined with autoethnography, enables me to explore the participants' experience of aerial circus training and performance combined with critical reflection of my own. Nelson identifies

practice-based research as a form of arts research 'where practitioners are comfortable with drawing out inferences from their processes and products and articulating them verbally' (2009, p. 117). Similarly, arts and science researcher Linda Candy says that the written word in practice-based research describes 'the significance and the context of the claims' however argues 'a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes' (2006, p. 1). Thus, the written thesis aims to provide the research context and articulate the practice-based research findings that argue the potential for social aerial circus to offer temporary release from established norms and achieve feminist goals of body ownership, self-confidence and self-representation.

An autoethnographic approach to practice research enabled me to consider the personal within this research, as my body became a site of knowledge as I responded to and explored participants' lived experiences through physical movement. In aerial instruction I physically give myself to the participants: I am lifting them and supporting them, guiding their bodies into different positions, and in doing so, some of their weight and impact is forever ingrained and held within my body. In aerial instruction a conversation between bodies takes place, a giving from one to the other, a passing of embodied knowledge and shared experience. The knowledge gained from this research was felt within my body as I moved through the research process. This study could be seen as a form of 'ethnocircus', inspired by the performance-based method of ethnodrama or ethnotheatre, as described by arts-based research scholar Patricia Leavy, which 'relies on using qualitative data garnered from ethnography, interviews, public documents, and other traditional qualitative research methods and then analyzing, interpreting, and representing the data via a dramatic script' (2009, p. 145). In this case the data is presented not through dramatic script, but through aerial performance in a final performance seminar and multimedia installation event with the aim of communicating participants' and my collective narrative. In this way the practice research moved beyond the primarily text-based performance of 'ethnodrama' to consider the embodied experience of aerial circus. As discussed, the written text alone cannot represent my physical practice, so the final practice research event as viewed by video is integral to this discussion. I invite the reader to view the event video online (appendix 1) or via the accompanying memory stick (back sleeve) after this introduction. Although this final event is the twin element of submission, alongside the written thesis, several videos and images which document the participant studies and developments of practice research can be found in appendix 3. These videos

and images give an insight into the practice-based research process and iterations of research and can be viewed in conjunction with the written text.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter one sets out to provide a discussion of the cultural context within which this research navigates and introduces themes of gender, performance and self-perception. I discuss expectations of heteronormative femininity and identify visual media as contributing to a pervasive sense of insufficiency amongst women. In this chapter I explore the theoretical basis of social aerial circus combined with digital media production as having the potential to challenge such feelings of inadequacy and discuss circus representations, the female aerialist and social circus.

Chapter two is concerned with the circus body as a site of research. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the practice-based and autoethnographic approach undertaken, with the aim of illustrating how the participant studies worked in tandem with practice research. Drawing on examples of contemporary circus performance this chapter locates my practice within a growing body of practitioners exploring the female body in circus and female representation. In this chapter I argue that aerial circus training offers a means of embodied control in uncertain times and that within specific contexts performance spaces can offer momentary relief from societal pressures. I discuss ideas of finding satisfaction in being looked at where the use of the digital image, rather than being a regulatory force, can be re-appropriated to positively play with self-image. Finally, this chapter discusses the different iterations of practice research which offer a physical exploration of participants' lived experiences in conjunction with theory.

Chapters three and four discuss and analyse the participant studies, beginning with an outline of the two studies and qualitative methods used to explore participants' lived experiences of aerial circus training and performance. Both these chapters draw upon qualitative data gathered over the course of the studies, combining interview material, informal discussions, survey data and observation. Due to the qualitative nature of these findings the results are presented in the form of quotations alongside my own interpretations. In chapter three I argue that aerial circus training and performance offers participants the opportunity to embody notions of power, control and strength, thus challenging ideas of female inferiority. I discuss participants' collection of bodily markings in the form of bruises and burns as contesting expectations of the female body to appear unmarked and pure. I argue that embodied experiences of capability through achieving in aerial circus training and performance challenge feelings of inadequacy. In chapter four I

discuss the combination of social aerial circus and digital media production which provided a space for participants to play with self-image. I argue that participants embodied notions of fantasy and acceptance, enabling a temporary release from social constraints. I claim that the use of digital media in this study offered participants an opportunity to capture their experiences, provided visual evidence of their achievements and offered a means of digital self-representation.

The conclusion offers reflections on what these interconnected practice research and participant-based findings mean for social circus and aerial circus debate. This chapter argues that the combination of social aerial circus with digital self-representation in this study offered a unique site for participants to play with self-image through the fantasy implicit in both disciplines. The central idea that has been developed is that social aerial circus offers a site for participants to disentangle some of the contradictions surrounding young women today and provides momentary release from social constraints.



## Chapter 1: Negotiating Femininity: Circus Representations and Female Experience

In the text *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* McRobbie describes young women as no longer being limited to the home, but 'confined to the topographies of an unsustainable self-hood, deprived of the possibilities of feminist sociality, and deeply invested in achieving an illusory identity defined according to a rigidly enforced scale of feminine attributes' (2009, p. 120). In an attempt to achieve this unattainable identity McRobbie argues that 'individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures ... so that self-monitoring practices ... replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways' (2009, p. 19) thus creating a 'landscape of self-improvement' (2009, p. 73). These ideas of an unobtainable identity and environment of self-improvement frame participants' experiences of social aerial circus training and performance and provide the cultural context within which this study navigates. It is these ideas of late modernity, combined with participant experience, that are explored through the physical body through the method of practice research. McRobbie highlights the beauty and fashion industries' role in this 'fraught state of non-identity which we all inhabit' (2009, p. 62) which can contribute to feelings 'of insufficiency, of never being good enough' (Bordo, 1993/1997, p. 91) through the frequent portrayal of slim, unblemished and standardised bodies. These feelings of inadequacy only serve to perpetuate this environment of self-improvement in a cycle of forever trying to better oneself to adhere to an unattainable ideal. McRobbie argues that this constant state of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy replace the regulating male gaze with 'self-imposed feminine cultural norms' (2009, p. 63), norms that are increasingly enforced through visual media. Feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky, in her chapter *Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, emphasises the 'growing power of the image in a society increasingly orientated toward the visual media' (1988/1997, p. 149), she indicates the prevalence of media which creates in women 'a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency' (1988/1997, p. 139). Similarly, Bordo discusses the role of media in impacting on 'the rules for femininity' which she argues 'have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized visual images' (1993/1997, p. 94). Although originally published in the 1980s and 1990s Bartky's and Bordo's emphasis on the role of visual media in influencing normative ideas of

femininity, and thus contributing to the unobtainable ideals discussed by McRobbie, still hold relevance today.

Women are consistently visually represented across billboards, in magazines, television, film and online depicting women as objects to be looked at and sell products. Images of women are increasingly prevalent in today's culture, and almost inescapable as a result of an increase in online media accessibility and the rise of social media, which continues to influence women's perceptions of themselves. The use of targeted online advertising is increasing with advertisers able to engage with specific demographics based on online user information. This enables advertisers to target women via their social media accounts, internet browsing, online television services and even their email accounts with advertisements selling products and experiences with the promise of self-improvement. Furthermore, there is an increase in use of social media networks, such as the photo-based platform Instagram described by clinical psychologist and doctoral candidate Rachel Cohen et al. as 'renowned for the ubiquitous 'selfie'' (Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2017, p. 186, emphasis in original). As a result of an increase in social media network usage, communications scholars Megan Vendemia and David DeAndrea argue that women 'are now able to create objectifying imagery for an audience to view and evaluate' (2018, p. 118). Vendemia and DeAndrea indicate that selfies can perpetuate sexist ideas of female beauty and add to the onslaught of media images depicting 'unattainable and unhealthy beauty norms similar to media images popularized by celebrities and professional models' (Marwick, 2015, cited by Vendemia and DeAndrea, 2018, p. 118). Digital humanities researcher Claire Bailey-Ross argues that 'the rapid expansion of accessible and affordable media technology, combined with near universal access to the internet is fundamentally altering the way society works' (2016, p. 14). She continues to discuss digital culture as bringing both new possibilities and 'cultural anxieties' (2016, p. 14) as digital technologies become increasingly central to everyday life and almost inescapable in modern society. Bailey-Ross indicates that 'Digital technology and media have infiltrated mainstream culture deeply, if not completely' (2016, p. 15). In a culture where women may already experience feelings of insufficiency, the prevalence of the visual image, and increasingly online images, can perpetuate this.

Social theorist Rosalind Gill, in her paper exploring postfeminist media culture, describes the 'contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses' (2007, p. 149) which she argues encapsulates 'both feminist and anti-feminist themes' (2007, p. 149). Gill describes

postfeminist discourse to 'include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment ...' (2007, p. 149). Gill's discussion here draws similarities between postfeminist discourse and neoliberal ideals of individualism and self-responsibility and highlights contemporary ideas of femininity as interconnected with the body. This correlates with McRobbie's argument that young women are navigating within a 'landscape of self-improvement' (2009, p. 73). Gill proposes that in postfeminist media culture 'The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness' (2007, p. 149). It is here, through aerial circus training and performance that I attempt to explore these ideas of feminine identity in late modernity. Shilling argues that 'there is a tendency for people in high modernity to place ever more importance on the body as constitutive of the self' (2003, p. 2). I do not suggest that the body is the only source of identity and self-representation, however I question the possibility of the aerial body as a site to explore the contradictions at the heart of being a woman today. Although in some respects aerial training promotes constant monitoring and discipline through repetitive movement, this is not necessarily in order to conform to a specific type of female attractiveness. The female aerialist's body in many respects actively rejects such conformity by challenging 'ideas of social power based on difference' (Tait, 2005a, p. 8) through the development of increased muscularity, upper body strength and accompanying bulk, and often a collection of bodily imperfections in the form of bruises, burns and callouses. Nevertheless, the use of costume, gestures and styling can facilitate the performance of normative ideas of femininity.

These considerations of gender performance lead us to gender theorist Judith Butler's concept of the performative body; she says 'One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body' (1988/1997, p. 404). Butler argues that the body offers a method of 'enacting possibilities ... to understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted' (1988/1997, p. 408). In a discussion of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), Young argues that 'Gender is nothing other than a social performative. The discursive rules of normative heterosexuality produce gendered performances that subjects reiterate and cite' (2005, p. 15). Butler uses the example of drag performance which she argues '*reveals the imitative structure of gender*' (1990/2006, p. 187, emphasis

in original) to illustrate the performative nature of gender through the enactment of exaggerated femininity. Aerialists also demonstrate a performance of gender and I locate the aerial body as in a constant navigation of binary ideas of masculinity and femininity through the body. Butler's concept of the performative body, whereby repeated regulatory practices produce gendered bodies (Butler, 1990/2006, p. 191), corresponds directly to aerial movement in that aerialists are required to repeat historical movements, gestures and emotions in order to hone their technique and physicality in line with aerial movement 'lineage' (Carter, 2014, p. 52). Literary scholar Helen Stoddart also connects Butler's ideas of gender performativity to aerialists and argues that the combination of the feminine costume and actions alongside the physical strength and level of risk 'do not allow for the separate codification of male and female performers' (2000, p. 174). Drawing together these ideas and in line with Butler's notion of 'internal subversion' (1990/2006, p. 173), as an intrinsically performative practice aerial circus offers an opportunity for subversion of societal norms and cultural shaping. It is here I question the role of the aerial body as an instrument of research to explore how cultural convention is embodied within the context of late modernity. This chapter considers circus representations, the symbolic meanings given to the female aerialist and the concept of social circus as framed by these ideas of the female body and media and online culture as a prevalent influence on female self-perception.

### **Circus Meanings and Representations**

This research explores the experience of social aerial circus training and performance as opposed to providing an analysis of circus aesthetic or audience experience. However, historical and current representations of circus inform participants' experience of this performative practice and therefore the practice and participant-based findings. Cultural scholar Olga Sorzano compares circus development in Britain and Colombia and examines the global power structures at play in the development of cultural practices in her doctoral thesis (2018a). She describes circus as 'a divided practice which is split into differentiated movements such as 'traditional', 'contemporary' or 'social' circus. While contemporary circus gains recognition as art, traditional circus is regarded as entertainment and social circus as therapy or social work' (Sorzano, 2018a, p. 10). While it can of course be argued that there are many cross-overs between these movements, Sorzano's succinct breakdown identifies circus as a 'divided practice' indicative of the many debates and contradictions within the field of circus, such as the tensions sometimes held between traditional and

contemporary artists, and at times between professional and community organisations, indicating that circus is still contested as a site of both highbrow and lowbrow culture. Sorzano continues to argue that 'ideas of circus as a marginal and transgressive form coexist with ideas of circus as a mainstream and massive entertainment business' (2018a, p. 20). She draws attention to the contradictory meanings and interpretations circus holds depending on the context and argues that social circus is often omitted from typical considerations of circus which primarily focus on audience experience as opposed to community-based practice (Sorzano, 2018a, p. 58). Bessone describes circus as 'a heterogeneous phenomenon' (2017a, p. 7) and Stoddart emphasises the multidimensional forms of circus, which depending on context, can vary between a successful corporate business, a community-based art form, family entertainment, contemporary theatre performance or socially orientated initiative (2000, p. 62). Both Bessone and Stoddart here indicate the wide-ranging reach of circus and the multiple guises circus has continued to adapt to in response to changing economic and cultural demands. Ultimately, the varied forms of circus illustrate 'the historical underpinning of today's circus flexibility, adaptability, instability, diversity and hybridity' (Bessone, 2017a, p. 16) demonstrating that circus is a site of resilience with the ability to work within the demands of late modernity, characterised by the need for versatility.

At the same time as proving its economic adaptability, circus is often considered as an inclusive form of social organisation. Cultural historian Marius Kwint in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* indicates circus has long been perceived as a 'redemptive space for social misfits and outsiders and those with something to hide or escape: an accepting environment that can accommodate anyone' (2012, p. 222). Kwint continues to argue that circus in historical literature has often 'represented a space of alterity and a critique of mainstream society' (2012, p. 222). This illustrates that circus is an historically representative site of difference, offering possible respite from conventionality. Additionally, Bessone argues that 'Circus artists inhabit a world still framed as separated, subcultural and 'different', but are increasingly required to manage effectively the relations with the economic field and the field of power' (2017a, p. 3, emphasis in original). Bessone here highlights the longevity of historical representations depicting circus as a place of alterity, but importantly draws attention to the requirement of circus artists to participate in economic systems. Circus artists now must navigate within these long-standing perceptions of circus as a subcultural form, yet at the same time engage in a culture that

strives for social unity. It is this perception of circus as a site of alterity that Bessone says 'enables social circus practitioners to justify and spread the use of circus as a tool for social work in disadvantaged contexts' (2017a, p. 29), where those considered to be marginalised can be brought together under these ideas of acceptance, often with the goal of social inclusion encouraging 'integration' (Spiegel, 2016, p. 52) within the mainstream.

Popular perceptions of circus are relevant to participants who, as stated by circus scholar and practitioner Reginald Bolton, are 'armed only with what they have seen, or been told' (2004, p. 44). In the text *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (2000) Stoddart draws upon literature written by Charles Dickens and films directed by Federico Fellini and Wim Wenders to provide a discussion of circus metaphors and representations in popular culture. Stoddart argues that circus figures are represented within literature and film 'in a way which confirms circus as a site of myth, fantasy, [and] symbol' (2000, p. 188). Additionally, Stoddart maintains that 'the body of the aerialist frequently operates as a sign for the circus whole' (2000, p. 7) where, in line with ideas of circus representation, the aerialist comes to epitomise ideas of freedom and strength. Similarly, Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (2006) first published in 1984, which features a female aerialist as the protagonist, explores ideas of escape and liberation within a magical world leaving the reader to question what is real and what is not. Carter's novel provokes questions around ideas of female body ownership, where the lead character Sophie Fevvers uses her wings (although the reader is left questioning the reality of these wings) to enhance her aerial trapeze act. Fevvers displays her wings at her choosing, yet at the same time is dependent on her wings and her body for financial stability raising questions around ideas of control and self-reliance. *Nights at the Circus* (2006) explores, among many other themes, ideas of the female body as spectacle and performative gender, intrinsic to notions of the female aerialist.

Based on these historical depictions, circus continues to be represented within popular culture today where women are frequently framed as independent, strong and powerful often at the same time as embracing conventional aesthetics of femininity using movement, costume and makeup as their performance tools. Cultural historian Janet Davis argues that 'In contemporary cultures, the circus is a gendered metaphor, signifying power, discipline, and flexible nonconformity for myriad women' (2011, p. 209). Davis highlights the role of circus in symbolising strong women, and discusses contemporary pop stars such as Pink, Janet Jackson, Britney Spears and Madonna having used circus within their

performances as ‘a frank acknowledgement of female power’ (2011, p. 207). These contemporary representations of circus certainly informed my own perceptions of circus as a site of glitz and glamour and evoke memories of muscular female bodies on stage. These modern uses of circus within popular culture ensure circus inhabits the mainstream based on repetitions of power, freedom and alterity, where, as described by Butler “‘subversion’ carries market value’ (1999/2006 p. xxiii, emphasis in original) enabling these representations to become market commodities. Artistic Director of Metta Theatre Poppy Burton-Morgan in the online article *A New Era for Women in Circus* says ‘Historically, circus was a place of huge emancipation for women’ (2018). She goes on to indicate that historically circus offered the opportunity for women to display physical strength and freedom of movement; however, in the present day she argues that the ‘male gaze’ and commodification of the female body has led to a sexualisation of the female circus performer (2018). Burton-Morgan discusses the role of female-led contemporary circus makers in exploring the subversive in their work and moving away from sexist ideals of the female body (2018). She indicates that this performance work can ‘disrupt these traditional gender norms and model ways of being that celebrate the female body for many other things’ (2018). These historical and contemporary representations of circus, and particularly the female body within circus, provide the context to this study, where circus simultaneously inhabits notions of conformity and ideas of alterity.

### **Symbolic Meanings of the Female Aerialist**

Circus includes an extensive number of skills and disciplines; however, this study focuses on aerial circus and primarily the use of aerial silks (fabric typically rigged to provide two tails of material), the fabric cocoon (fabric rigged to create a hammock-like loop) and the aerial hoop (a circular steel hoop, often wrapped with tape). Both the cocoon and hoop are ideal as starting apparatuses, enabling participants to build strength and stamina before moving on to the silks, which require more strength as there is less opportunity for resting positions. These aerial disciplines can often be considered as predominantly feminine in comparison to flying trapeze for example which is ‘still dominated by men’ as indicated by Carter (2014, p. 84). In addition, Carter notes that aerial circus is currently a largely female practice in the UK (2014, p. 84). I draw similarities between aerial circus, particularly aerial silks and hoop, and neo-burlesque performance described by dance and cultural researcher Sherril Dodds as a performance art based on traditional burlesque dance and performed

‘within the popular entertainment context of cabaret’ (2011/2014, p. 106). In a discussion of neo-burlesque performance, Dodds argues that ‘female stereotypes are both embraced and challenged’ as they ‘enter a critical performance site that allows them to take excessive pleasure in and actively reject images of femininity located within the patriarchal paradigm’ (2011/2014, p. 131). Like neo-burlesque aerial circus offers a site to explore gender identity through not only the performance of gender, but also the physical experience of aerial action.

Tait provides significant analysis of the cultural representation of the female aerialist in her key text *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (2005a). Tait uses archival research methods and cultural analysis to investigate gender and identity within aerial performance, applying feminist and performance concepts. Tait discusses the conflicting social level of aerial performers in the nineteenth century: when performing at height the female aerialist represented the top of the circus hierarchy, whilst off stage her identity (due to her gender) was of low social status (2005a, p. 34). Tait’s research explores crucial concepts of gender identity and the evolution of muscular bodies in female aerial performance. She explains that the ‘social perception of upper-body muscularity is not straightforward, because it is conventionally associated with masculine identity’ (2005a, p. 2). Furthermore, Tait proposes that the female aerialists’ body questions a patriarchal society and male dominance by demonstrating physical capability equivalent to that of a man’s (2005a, p. 24, p. 38, p. 61). Although female physical strength may be considered as more acceptable today than in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, muscularity is still often seen as representative of ‘masculinity, strength and power’ (Bunsell, 2013, p. 42). For example, Carter discusses some of her female aerial students who raised concerns about the physical impact of participation with comments such as “‘I don’t mind being toned” ... “but I don’t want to look like a man”” (2014, p. 92, emphasis in original). Carter explains that ‘even in the twenty-first century there is still a ‘marking out’ from the conventional female form that can occur through engaging in aerial action’ (2014, p. 93, emphasis in original). This illustrates that the female aerialist’s body today still has the potential to challenge female stereotypes and ideas of weakness.

Performance historian Kate Holmes, whose research explores female aerial stars of the 1920s and early 1930s, discusses the notion of the female aerialist’s body ‘as the site of gender blurring’ (2016, p. 162), building upon Tait’s idea of ‘double gendering’ (2005a, p. 31), where the female aerialist displays a combination of both masculine and feminine



qualities in a performance of body ownership and control. This analysis locates the aerial body in line with Bunsell's study of female bodybuilders who, she argues, have the potential of 'breaking down and confusing the longstanding Western dichotomies between male/female, hard/soft, strong/weak, resilient/vulnerable and unnatural/natural' (2013, p. 149). Holmes usefully introduces concepts of body ownership and self-control in relation to aerial performance as empowering where she says that 'it reframed female strength as acceptable through bodily perception, the association with freedom also added another dimension to the empowering potential of viewing aerial acts' (2016, p. 206 – 207). Although both Holmes (2016) and Tait (2005a) primarily discuss these concepts of power and control in relation to audience perception of aerial circus, these themes are integral to the experience of aerial training and performance. Holmes continues to discuss the 1920s and 1930s female aerialist's body 'as having agency through its bodily control' (2016, p. 111) but also notes the difficult position of the female aerialist in not presenting themselves as 'too masculine' (2016, p. 111). Holmes describes this representation as 'precariously balanced' (2016, p. 111) linking closely to McRobbie's tightrope metaphor that 'asks of girls that they perform masculinity' in line with heteronormative ideas of femininity (2009, p. 84). These discussions illustrate the female aerialist's body as in a constant navigation of ideas of gender and performance. In considering ideas of freedom, Holmes explicates:

Aerial action creates within the person watching it a fantasy of impossible projection that glorifies – glamour's allure is precisely this process of impossible positive identification. Aerialists were, and are, glamorous, because experiencing aerial motion is a fantasy of transformation into a free body unfettered from worldly constraints. (2017, p. 311)

These ideas of the aerialist as symbolic of freedom have previously been explored by Stoddart, who argues that 'the body of the aerialist is weighed down by no regulation and is governed only by its singular self-discipline and strength' (2000, p. 7). By contrast, Carter challenges this view and asserts that 'Aerialists have continued to be associated with perpetuating conventions of physicality, coded structures and aesthetics' (2014, p. 215 - 216). Aerial performance, particularly commercial performance, is riddled with regulation of the female body in terms of aesthetics, styling and choreography as discussed by dramaturg and theatre scholar Francesca Peschier in the online article *The Extraordinary Bodies of Aerial Circus* (2019). Performance researcher and circus artist Laura Murphy identifies this 'contradiction' in perceptions of circus as representative of freedom and

fantasy and indicates that circus often perpetuates 'heteronormative ideas of beauty – whiteness, skinniness, prettiness, shaved underarms and legs' (Murphy, interviewed by Peschier, 2019). Likewise, physical theatre actress and aerialist Farrel Cox discusses the lack of 'variation and representation in the main stream' and says 'It's still very much glamour comes first – and because they've got the money, that's what gets the most publicity' (Cox, interviewed by Peschier, 2019). Murphy and Cox's arguments here highlight the female aerialist as often conforming to heteronormative ideas of beauty, although do not acknowledge the usually visible muscularity developed as a result of this physical practice. So, although the female aerialist can be representative of ideas of strength, freedom and glamour, aerialists in current times can find themselves bound by these historical aesthetics and representations, thus contradicting notions of control, agency and liberation. These discussions highlight the contradictory nature of circus representation as potentially different to performer experience, however they do inform this study's participant experience which is located within the context of social circus as opposed to professional performance.

### **Understanding Social Circus**

While this study builds on historical notions of the female aerialist as representative of freedom, power and control, and considers the contradictions within this, it is important to consider the social framework within which participants' experiences are negotiated. Social circus is often considered as the use of circus arts to enact 'personal development, social inclusion and self-expression as opposed to the achievement of a high level of artistic technique, as provided by professional circus schools' (Cadwell, 2018, p. 22). Thus social circus initiatives can offer a different experience to recreational or professional circus training and performance with emphasis placed on the community-based qualities of this practice. Cadwell indicates that Bolton is often considered 'One of the pioneers of the social circus movement' (2018, p. 20) due to his doctoral research which explores notions of circus as an art form and how it relates to childhood experience and provides early research into the use of circus arts as a transformational practice (Bolton, 2004). Likewise, Bolton's book *Circus in a Suitcase* emphasises the idea that anyone can do circus and that indeed, circus is for all (1982, p. 3), building upon notions of circus as a site of acceptance. Lavers highlights the difference between traditional circus where 'skills were (and still are)' passed on selectively between family (2016, p. 512), and social circus where skills are widely shared

as a method to foster other types of social qualities (2016, p. 513). Sorzano indicates 'social circus is broadly understood as a program operating outside the professional and performance circus worlds that uses circus skills as a tool for 'assisting' vulnerable populations' (2018b, p. 116, emphasis in original).

Cirque du Soleil's community focussed Cirque du Monde programme, formed in 1995, promotes social circus practice and supports practitioner training and numerous social circus organisations (Cirque du Soleil, 2019). Cirque du Soleil is often thought of as initiating social circus practice (Sorzano, 2018b, p. 117) although this practice takes place globally under various names and in many forms. Circus performer and anthropologist Nick McCaffery states that 'Social circus is a relatively new term in U.K.-based discourse, as U.K. circus groups have tended to use the term 'community circus' to describe working with non-professional circus performers' (2014, p. 33, emphasis in original). He continues to argue that for some the meanings are the same regardless of the title, while for others social circus holds greater significance with a focus on social development and transformation (2014, p. 33). The year 2002 brought an important moment in social circus history 'as representatives from thirteen countries drew up and signed a charter of social circus' (Bolton, 2004, p. 160) in France at 'the First International Round Table of Circus and Social Work, organized by Cirque Pour Tous, the international fundraiser arm of Colombia's NGO Circo Para Todos (Circus for All)' (Sorzano, 2018b, p. 118). This meeting provided an opportunity for circus practitioners to meet to discuss this practice, its meaning and goals (Bolton, 2004; Sorzano, 2018b; Lavers, 2016). Sorzano states that it was here that 'circus organisations from twelve countries agreed to use the term social circus' (2018a, p. 237).

There are a number of existing studies in the field of social circus such as health and medicine scholar Annalee Yassi and theatre scholar Jennifer Beth Spiegel's analysis of the national social circus program in Ecuador (2013 - 2016). Key findings of this study discussed by Spiegel et al. include the familial aspect as important to participants' experiences of social circus and highlight individual experiences of increased trust, physicality and confidence (Spiegel, Breilh, Campaña, Marcuse & Yassi, 2015, p. 71). Building on this study, which called for more in-depth research into the impact of social circus participation (Spiegel et al., 2015, p. 72), Spiegel has undertaken further research in the field of social circus alongside community health researcher Stephanie Parent (2017). Their critical mixed methods study investigates how social circus affects personal and community development of marginalised youth in Quebec (Spiegel & Parent, 2017). This study defines social circus

as ‘the use of circus arts with equity-seeking communities’ (Spiegel & Parent, 2017, p. 2) and places particular importance on the transformational effects of participation in social circus activities, as a method to address current social inequalities. Participants were drawn from ‘four of the eight Cirque du Monde-affiliated social circus groups in the province of Quebec’ (Spiegel & Parent, 2017, p. 4), chosen as these groups were predominantly aimed at marginalised youth. Spiegel and Parent adapted questionnaires on social inclusion and personal growth to suit their requirements to gather quantitative data, underpinned by qualitative data to provide context using observation, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic study. Spiegel and Parent emphasise the importance of participants becoming bodily aware through the participation in social circus activities (2017, p. 13). They note the physicality required to take part encouraged collective support, trust building, measured risk taking and the adaptation of lifestyle habits ‘whereby participants felt compelled to alter their consumption patterns (including substance use)’ (Spiegel & Parent, 2017, p. 13). Once again, as established in Spiegel et al.’s study on the social circus in Ecuador, the notion of ‘circus as a family’ (Spiegel & Parent, 2017, p. 9) was apparent amongst participants, where an increased sense of belonging was felt. Significant aspects of personal transformation that participants cited included increased facility in creative expression, trust, discipline, physicality and playfulness through participation in a collective endeavour (Spiegel & Parent, 2017, p. 6 – 7). Spiegel and Parent’s research provides useful analysis of the impacts of social circus initiatives from a health equity and community development perspective adding to the growing body of evidence supporting social circus practice.

Another important study relevant to this enquiry is social circus practitioner Anna Saarelainen’s mixed-methods master’s research (2017) which explores how media are currently used in social circus activities. This is the only scholarly study I have found to date that explores the relationship between social circus and media usage. Saarelainen’s research documents and compares how media are used in two social circus groups, one in Finland and one in Brazil. Her findings indicate media use in social circus enables the sharing of ideas and techniques, documentation and communication with other organisations and instructors (Saarelainen, 2017, p. 49). Saarelainen indicates that media is often used for demonstrative or documentation purposes (2017, p. 50) as opposed to exploring participant or performer experience. However, Saarelainen does highlight participants’ use of digital image sharing was indicative of participants feeling proud of themselves (2017, p.

51) which becomes an important aspect of this study's participant experience. This study moves beyond Saarelainen's thesis in using a practice-based approach in order to actively create a social aerial circus programme engaged with digital media production as opposed to considering how media are already used.

Spiegel et al. indicate that social circus organisations and initiatives make many claims with regard to the positive impacts of social circus participation (2015, p. 66). However, they argue that 'little scholarship exists on their impact' (Spiegel et al., 2015, p. 65). Conversely, Sorzano in her doctoral thesis draws attention to some of the conflicts within social circus practice and research (2018a, p. 236 - 239). She highlights issues of inferiorisation in relation to social circus as well as tensions between professional and non-professional practice (Sorzano, 2018a, p. 237 – 239). Sorzano discusses the contradictions and conflicts in describing social circus participants as in need of assistance and the potentially negative impact of this. She builds upon French sociologist Brigitte Bailly's ideas and argues that 'such perception leads to a denial of participants' competencies and potential' (Bolton, 2004, p. 12 cited by Sorzano, 2018a, p. 237). Sorzano outlines a different approach to the concept of social circus in Latin America, where rather than being separated from ideas of professionalism, social circus participants are encouraged to become professional circus practitioners (Sorzano, 2018a, p. 241). Sorzano's analysis here confronts typically positive narratives of social circus and challenges the divide between professional and community circus practices. Sorzano makes the crucial statement: 'circus is now portrayed as offering an opportunity to join the system rather than challenge it' (2018a, p. 252). She continues to argue that social circus practitioners "assist" them [participants] to become 'better citizens', to become the norm.' (Sorzano, 2018a, p. 266, emphasis in original). Sorzano's discussion builds on Spiegel's argument identifying the contradictory nature of social circus in promoting community and support (Spiegel, 2016, p. 52) at the same time as encouraging social integration and economic participation (Spiegel, 2016, p. 59). In considering these ideas of social inclusion communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser discusses the recent focus on young women and girls as productive and active economic citizens (2015, p. 182) in the article 'Confidence you can carry!': girls in crisis and the market for girls' empowerment organizations. In line with issues of inferiorisation in social circus, Banet-Weiser indicates that organisations that seek to empower young women often fail to address 'the structural and infrastructural mechanisms that operate to diminish girls' confidence' (2015, p. 183). Banet-Weiser's

discussion of 'girls' empowerment organizations' (2015) mirrors Sorzano's argument that social circus potentially offers participants the opportunity to become active citizens as opposed to challenging the system (2018a, p. 252). These discussions raise questions around the validity of social skill development initiatives which place the responsibility on the individual to succeed following participation, without an attempt to address wider inequalities. Yet, the focus on collective support and community in social circus initiatives indicate the potential to challenge wider cultural neoliberal ideas of individualism and self-responsibility. Additionally, these discussions emphasise the potential for engagement in social circus to increase participants' feelings of belonging and self-confidence whilst navigating within these economic frameworks. Although social circus initiatives may not always address wider inequalities, they can raise consciousness around social issues. This is where the combination of social circus with training in digital media production skills offers an opportunity to explore the wider context of visual media in perpetuating feelings of insufficiency in women.

## **Conclusion**

Media and online culture contribute to a 'landscape of self-improvement' (McRobbie, 2009, p. 73) and encourage feelings of female inadequacy through enforcing rigid ideals of heteronormative femininity. The aerialist's body demonstrates Butler's concept of performative gender (1990/2006, p. 191) through the embodiment of muscularity and strength combined with feminine performance in what Tait terms as 'double gendering' (2005a, p. 31). Longstanding historical representations of circus as a site of acceptance and the female aerialist as symbolic of strength, power and control inform participant and audience expectations of aerial circus. Social circus research points towards the positive transformational impact of participation in circus activity and suggests a possible interface between physical practice and the social self. Social circus inhabits contradictions of circus as a site of acceptance and collective support alongside ideas of integration into the mainstream. I question whether social circus can be transgressive when working within the context of hierarchical structures. Aerial circus provides ample metaphors for precariousness and contradictions in a performance of risk, strength, control and grace. Similarly, the concept of combining social aerial circus with digital media production is symbolic of the need for adaptability and flexibility in the changing economic landscape, but also provides a real tangible approach to engaging women with digital media

production skills. Although Saarelainen's master's research (2017) goes some way in extending the understandings of the role of media within existing social circus initiatives, digital media production is yet to be used as a method to explore participant and performer experience. The combination of disciplines has the potential to explore internalised feelings of insufficiency and inferiority and offers an opportunity for both physical and digital re-appropriation to reappraise heteronormative ideas of femininity.

## Chapter 2: The Circus Body as a Site of Research

The personal nature of reflecting upon my lived experience of aerial circus training and performance was not something I had fully anticipated at the start of the study. Yet, it is the personal and reflective approach that has led to key findings and it was therefore a necessary step in exploring the impact of social aerial circus training and performance on female self-perception and the role of media and online culture within this study. The process has forced me to question my practice, and in turn, question my early experiences of aerial circus and what this practice means to me now. This resulted in 'a continual reflection upon that practice' (Candy, 2006, p. 4) that is integral to practice-based research. In doing so I was led to question my commercial performance work and consider how I could be perceived by others and the heteronormative aesthetic ideals that some of my performances perpetuated. I was forced to consider my teaching practice, my role and responsibilities as a recreational aerial circus and flexibility instructor to further understand my students' motivations and the wider context of the activity, where by and large my students are of a similar demographic to the participants of this study. In the article *Practice-as-research and the Problem of Knowledge* Nelson discusses writing as the recognised mode 'of storage and distribution of knowledge' (2006, p. 105) and argues that embodied knowledge has the potential to challenge this established notion. Embodied knowledge became particularly pertinent when it came to passing my corporeal knowledge to participants; I shared my bodily experiences of aerial circus in what 'Tait calls a 'living history'' (Tait, 2005b, cited by Carter, 2014, p. 50) 'where aerial skills have transferred from aerialist to aerialist across time' (Carter, 2014, p. 50). Participants then explored this knowledge and developed their own experiences of aerial circus training and performance. By sharing this knowledge, I came to the realisation that this research is about the collective narrative: the participants' experiences in relation to my own. Practice research offered a means to explore this collective narrative through my circus body, using physical movement as a mode of research. I undertook an autoethnographic approach to reflect upon my experiences and connect my practice research to the participant-based studies. Before I present the findings from the participant studies in the following two chapters, I offer autoethnographic reflections to discuss my lived experiences of aerial circus training and performance and offer a discussion of the different iterations of practice research.



My practice research was conducted between November 2016 to June 2019; however, it was borne out of ten years of circus training and performance. As such, my physical practice has inevitably contributed to my thinking during the final stages of writing. Interacting with participants directly informed the direction of the practice research, likewise the practice research fed in to the two participant-based studies. Initially I began with the development of my aerial teaching skills, working with the Brighton based circus group High Top Circus, who provide adult and youth aerial circus classes. Over the course of an eight-month period (November 2016 – June 2017) I shadowed instructors, provided teaching support and observed classes in order to further my aerial teaching abilities and to reflect upon my role as an instructor. During this initial period, I also participated in the female mentorship programme The Girls' Network, which works with young women and girls from less advantaged communities based on the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (Deprivation 2015, 2015). Over the course of a nine-month period (October 2016 – June 2017) I received mentorship training and met with my Havant-based mentee regularly to discuss employment, education and topics of importance to her. This experience furthered my understanding of young women's experiences in late modernity and the pressure to succeed. During this initial period (November 2016 – June 2017) I also undertook a series of aerial circus and digital media experiments using 360-degree video and point of view video. This enabled me to explore the use of these technologies in physical practice and the possibilities of integrating such technologies with aerial performance. Additionally, presenting at conferences 'Cirque de Demain' (Paris, France, January 2017) and 'Imagineers in Circus and Science: Scientific Knowledge and Creative Imagination' (Canberra, Australia, April 2018) provided an opportunity to present my early ideas and findings and to gather feedback from practitioners and scholars alike. Similarly, attending both academic and practitioner events such as: the 'Roundhouse and Upswing's Creative Exchange for Circus Directors and Makers' (London, UK, April 2017), 'Dissecting Aerial Symposium' (Eastleigh, UK, January 2018 and 2019), 'European Aerial Dance Festival' (Eastleigh, UK, August 2018), 'Circus and Its Others' conference (Prague, Czech Republic, August 2018) and 'Serious Circus Symposium' (London, UK, February 2019) was essential in feeding my practice research and provided an opportunity to move between theory and practice. Throughout this research I kept a written diary, consisting of an amalgamation of participant study programmes and lesson plans, field notes and reflective accounts of experiences as prompted by my interactions with participants and peers, along with notes

on my physical training and commercial performances. It is these diary excerpts that I draw on throughout this chapter to discuss my interpretations of aerial circus training and performance, and that informed the development of my practice research.

### **Autoethnographic Reflections**

I adopted an autoethnographic approach in order to draw upon the personal knowledge gained throughout this research process and to reflect upon my lived experiences in relation to those of this study's participants. Performance scholar Tami Spry argues that 'The autoethnographic text emerges from the researcher's bodily standpoint as she is continually recognizing and interpreting the residue traces of culture inscribed upon her hide from interacting with others in contexts' (2001, p. 711). Spry describes 'the body as the site from which the story is generated, thus beginning the methodological praxis of reintegrating my body and mind into my scholarship' (2001, p. 708). Autoethnography enabled me to explore my experiences of aerial circus practice and connect these to the theories and concepts discussed throughout this thesis, where my body acted as a site to produce the collective narrative developed as a result of this study. Spry argues that performance offers a means to 'reinhabit' the body (2001, p. 716) and enables an immersion in experience. In the case of the present study, performance enabled me to 'reinhabit' (Spry, 2001, p. 716) my body and reflect upon previous experiences. The reflective process discussed is not simply a means of communication, but 'a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts' (Spry, 2001, p. 710) correlating with Young's notion that the lived body considers experience within 'a specific sociocultural context' (2005, p. 16). It is here, through practice research, that I invite you to understand my lived experiences of aerial circus training and performance, viewing the body as a site of knowledge, with the aim of making this "'tacit knowledge' explicit' (Nelson, 2006, p. 112, emphasis in original) through the written word.

### **Aerial Circus Training: A Form of Bodily Control**

It has been an emotional process analysing participant data, reflecting upon my experiences in response to their own and considering my body. Several of the study participants had hypermobility<sup>2</sup> to varying degrees, and others discussed their relationships with anxiety and mental health issues, which triggered reflection on and an exploration of

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<sup>2</sup> Where your joints are more flexible than other people's (NHS, 2017)

my own experiences of anxiety and hypermobility. One participant discussed her experience of forcing herself to come to an aerial session when she was feeling particularly low, she noted she had forgotten to take her medication that morning and 'was feeling terrible'. However, she stated: 'within about fifteen minutes of getting there I was like, yeah course I wanted to still come, I really enjoy this! You know, but that's it isn't it, when depression tells you you're not going to enjoy stuff and that you're not worth having that enjoyment' (Lottie, personal communication, September 2017). For Lottie, her aerial practice in this instance enabled her momentarily to challenge her feelings of depression and reminded her that she could do activities that she enjoyed. Similarly, another participant noted that attending the aerial sessions enabled her to 'feel a bit more in control' by having 'time not thinking about work and just doing something that was completely unrelated' (Annie, personal communication, February 2019). I am prone to anxiety and have waded in and out of bouts of anxiety and depression over the course of my life. As a teenager and in my early twenties I also suffered from chronic headaches and acute migraines. I felt helpless and unable to control how my body responded to my anxiety. I also have hypermobility in some areas of my body; it runs in my family. I have two 'hinges' in particular (where the joint has an extreme range of movement): one in my lower/mid back and another in my neck. My circus practice allows me to gain control over my body to some extent, by enabling me to build strength in order to support these hinges. Hypermobility can affect people differently and I do not have an extreme or debilitating version of it. However, being able to use my hypermobility in my circus practice enables me to feel that it is not a hindrance, but rather a celebrated aspect of my body. Circus practice enables me to understand and respect my body, its needs and the importance of listening to it. I had not previously considered circus practice in relation to my anxiety, but I now see this physical practice as a form of coping, a form of managing my anxiety and bodily experiences.

Spry discusses her experience of 'Embodying theory about anorexia nervosa through performance' where she says that this allowed her 'to enter the uninhabitable corporeal terrain of my 16-year-old body, and to problematize the context in which the anorexia thrived' (2001, p. 715). In a similar vein, practice research enabled me to occupy my bodily experience of anxiety and chronic headaches and question the cultural context within which my body was, and still is, located. First, I draw attention to physiological links between hypermobility and anxiety. There is a growing body of scientific research exploring

the connections between joint hypermobility syndrome and anxiety and panic disorders (see Bulbena et al., 1993; Bulbena et al., 2004; Bulbena et al., 2011; Garcia-Campayo et al., 2011). Likewise, Jessica Anne Eccles' recent doctoral research exploring hypermobility and psychiatric symptoms connects hypermobility to a number of 'psychopathological diagnoses, including the general expression of anxiety' (2016, p. 2). Eccles' findings (2016) are frequently shared across social media platforms prompting discussion and a sharing of experiences among those with hypermobility. This suggests the potential for future movement-based research exploring embodied experiences of anxiety with persons who have hypermobility. Although this thesis is not specifically focussed on physiology of the body, the process of deepening my understanding of hypermobility enabled further reflection upon my experiences and an understanding of why my body moves or responds in particular ways. For example, I learnt that hypermobile bodies are more likely to bruise easily and can take more effort to develop proprioception and strength. I am now more aware of the effects of hypermobility on my students' bodies and how to support them in their training. The process also deepened my understanding of my own anxiety. I now realise that building physical strength to support my mobility, and thus having more physical control of my body, contributes to feelings of control in everyday situations.

While physiology is important, this thesis primarily considers the cultural context within which the body navigates in relation to ideas of self-perception. In a discussion of developing body habits, Young argues that 'The girl learns actively to hamper her movements ... she develops a bodily timidity that increases with age. In assuming herself to be a girl, she takes herself to be fragile' (1977/2005, p. 43). My anxiety and headaches as a young woman led to feelings of fragility and a lack of self-confidence. These were feelings that lived within my body for years, that still live within me. Bunsell, in her ethnographic research, communicates the story of a research participant's journey into bodybuilding who states: 'I was a very sickly child ... and I didn't want to be this weak kid' (2013, p. 52). Although Bunsell's participant and my own journeys differ, similarities lie in our desire to differentiate ourselves from our illnesses, a desire to be perceived as strong, independent and in control of our bodies (2013, p. 52). We each found activities that enabled us to build physical strength, more so than typical exercise classes or sports may allow us to achieve. We both engaged in activities that required perseverance and personal control in order to feel we had moved on from an earlier version of ourselves.

In her analysis of female bodybuilding Bunsell argues that 'body projects' (2013, p. 4), such as developing the physique of a bodybuilder or aerialist, have thrived in late modernity, 'an era characterized by uncertainty, a fragmentation of social life and a volatile economic environment. In this way, body projects can be seen as a form of control in an 'unstable' world' (2013, p. 4, emphasis in original). Building on Bunsell's notion of the uncertain times within which participants' bodies navigate, Harris says that 'It is young people who must try to forge their futures by mastering their anxieties, uncertainties, and insecurities conjured up by unpredictable times' (2004, p. 5). It is within this cultural context that I seek a sense of bodily control and within which participants revelled in their newfound physical strength as a result of their aerial practice. Aerial circus training and performance offers the opportunity to build physical strength and control in a way that contradicts Young's description of young girls' physical development in patriarchal society (1977/2005, p. 43). As opposed to restraining one's movement, aerial circus invites participants to take up space by moving vertically through the air, described by Tait as moving 'in and out of the force field of masculine control' (1994, p. 92). Similarly, rather than encouraging feelings of fragility, aerial circus builds physical resilience as participants develop bodily strength and control. Like Bunsell's consideration of female bodybuilding (2013, p. 4), aerial practice offers a means of embodied control in uncertain times.

### **Performance Identities: An Escape from the Day-to-day**

Participants discussed the value of their performance events in permitting them to become someone else outside of their usual identities of mother, wife, employee, or student. Performing provided them with an opportunity to explore a side of their identity that they do not always feel able to explore day-to-day. Lindsey described the satisfaction she felt as a result of her physical achievements in her aerial sessions which she described as lifting her spirits. She discussed the value of aerial training and performance as something 'that's got nothing to do with your job, your hobbies or what you do at home ... it was only an hour and a half, but it was a release from the mundane day job' (Lindsey, personal communication, January 2019). Working with participants, and understanding their experiences of aerial performance, prompted me to consider my performance identity, Twisted Nymph. This research led me to question the role she plays in my life. On reflection, Twisted Nymph has become an extension of myself, a means to explore elements of my identity that I do not feel able to embrace within other contexts. As noted in my reflective

writing: 'She gives me an outlet, an opportunity to be someone else. Her body sits at my desk writing, shoulders low, anxious. She sheds this anxiety, steps into her costumes, onto the stage, to twist, climb, contort, smile, to perform' (C. Watt *diary*). Cultural historian Annette Kuhn, in her chapter *The Body and Cinema: Some problems for feminism*, describes performance as a façade (1988/1997, p. 200). She argues that in performance 'a distance of some sort is implied between the "act" and the "real self" concealed behind it ... Performance, in other words, poses the possibility of a mutable self, of a fluid subjectivity' (1988/1997, p. 200, emphasis in original). Kuhn's discussion here identifies performance as a site to embody alterity; a site to move between the identities represented in the act of performance and the authentic self. The body in aerial performance offers identity transformation through physical movement, where participants engage in aerial movement 'transferred from aerialist to aerialist across time' (Carter, 2014, p. 50). Like in Kuhn's discussion of bodybuilding, aerial performance involves 'an active production of the body' (1988/1997, p. 200), where participants engage in training and repetitive action to adapt their body in order to achieve the physical feats desired. Although enhanced through costume and makeup, the performative body becomes the chief site of alterity in displaying the movement required of the act, which is far removed from participants' and my own visions of our typical selves (wife, mother, student, employee etc.). Aerial movement offers a performative mask to our self-perceived identities, however in contrast to the costumes and the makeup, the actively produced aerial body cannot be detached and moves with us through our daily tasks.

Notions of performance and identity are discussed by Bartky who considers ideas of 'Femininity as a spectacle' in her chapter *Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power* (1988/1997, p. 140). If, as argued by Bartky, women are obliged to make a spectacle of themselves due to 'the inescapability of judgement' (1988/1997, p. 140), I explore the possibility of actively creating this spectacle through aerial performance. Feminist theorist Mary Russo, in her chapter *Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory*, discusses the notion of 'making a spectacle out of oneself' as a 'feminine danger' (1986/1997, p. 318). However, where the female aerialist is inherently interconnected with ideas of risk and danger, the aerial body is ideally placed to contest such ideas of female spectacle. Revisiting my early impressions of female circus performers, I perceived these women to be unashamed and unapologetic in displaying their bodies. I viewed these women as active in making a spectacle of themselves. I now understand this to not always

be the case, as illustrated in circus performer Fiona Bradley's argument where she felt forced into performing at events and adhering to homogenised aesthetics that she did not feel comfortable with in order to survive financially (2018). This leads us to Russo's question: 'In what sense can women really produce or make spectacles out of themselves?' (1986/1997, p. 322) in a culture where 'the woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject ... that in sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects and mere bodies' (Young, 1977/2005, p. 44). Does aerial circus performance, 'invite objectification' (Young, 1977/2005, p. 45) through free bodily movement? These ideas of objectification, spectacle and the female body in circus are increasingly under debate within the circus industry and explored through performance by circus artists and makers such as Laura Murphy (2017; 2019), Ellie Dubois (2018), Natalie Reckert and Mark Morreau (2018), Alula Cyr (2018) to name but a few UK based practitioners whose work I have seen during the course of this study. In considering ideas of the gaze in circus performance, I draw on performance researcher and circus artist Laura Murphy, as interviewed in the online article *The Extraordinary Bodies of Aerial Circus*, who argues that 'If you shift the perimeters so that you are looking at a person who can do these things rather [than] the action – so the subject not the object, then you get something quite different' (Murphy, interviewed by Peschier, 2019). In this respect, the performance context becomes increasingly important with regard to the present study. Participants opted for internal performance events as opposed to public performances, choosing to be each other's audience rather than inviting in an outsider's gaze. In this environment participants celebrated each other's individual and collective achievements as opposed to being viewed as objects. Once again, I refer to Bunsell's study on female bodybuilders to highlight the environment as significant in this debate. For the participants of Bunsell's research 'the gym acted as a partial refuge and retreat against the malevolence of the outside world' (2013, p. 157). Similarly, the space where the aerial sessions took place became a sort of haven for the study's participants. This was evidenced during discussions at the final practice research event where a male attendee asked participants about their choices of what could be perceived as a 'sexy and glamorous' aesthetic during their final performances, which were documented by video, and asked what they thought about such a reception. The participants responded that they had not considered how they looked to others. For participants, the aerial studio offered a safe space free from the male gaze and judgement; their focus was on enjoyment as opposed to actively adhering to stereotypical

ideals of female beauty. Similarly, within my own performance spaces where I primarily perform at cabaret style events, I find myself in environments where gender binaries are challenged, and gender fluidity welcomed. Like participants, I had not truly considered how my aesthetic choices may be perceived by others outside of this context. Although, as has been discussed throughout this thesis, this study operates within a culture that holds a specific feminine ideal, I argue that performance spaces within specific contexts can offer temporary respite from such pressures, if only momentarily.

### **Digital Media: Self-representation and Pleasure in Being Seen**

In discussing social pressures with participants, they identified media and online culture and specifically social media as particularly problematic. Lucy for example discussed the ‘pressure that society and the media place on young people ... to have this almost separate life online as to what you do in real life’ although she noted this was not restricted by gender. She described social media profiles as ‘like an alter ego ... it’s just like a façade really, how people want to represent themselves’ (Lucy, personal communication, January 2019). Lucy’s discussion, alongside other similar comments made by participants, brought to the forefront ideas of self-representation and the falsity that can be presented on social media platforms. Discussions with participants on their views of media, and social media in particular, prompted me to consider online media culture within my circus practice and circus community. Online media culture and the use of the digital image is increasingly prevalent in circus practice with the rise of Instagram and the constant pressure to promote oneself. I connect the concept of creating my performance identity to the idea of curating an online identity, which is increasingly part of young people’s day-to-day lives. Dobson argues that young women, existing within neoliberal ideals, ‘are called toward public self-representation, visibility, and self-exposure, and encouraged to express and represent their life narratives in terms of personal and professional choice, success, and achievement’ (2015, p. 40). Furthermore, Harris argues that ‘The normalization of the insertion of the public gaze into the private regulates young women by demanding a constant display of self’ (2004, p. 130) suggesting that online media, particularly in the form of social networking platforms, encourages young women to become bound up in the continual sharing of self-representations thereby losing touch with their ‘real’ selves. Bunsell, in her discussion of female bodybuilding, claims that ‘The ‘male gaze’ is rejected, but is arguably replaced by yet another voyeur’ (2013, p. 68, emphasis in original). She argues that



participants of female bodybuilding self-regulate in response to their own aesthetic ideal and although not necessarily conforming to typical Western ideals of femininity, these women embark on continual self-improvement body projects with a focus on how the body looks (Bunsell, 2013, p. 63). Similarly, Murphy advises against the inclusion of Instagram culture in circus performance as it perpetuates a focus on aesthetic as opposed to considering the individual behind the performance (Murphy, interviewed by Peschier, 2019). Drawing on these discussions, I argue that the infiltration of online media culture within circus training and performance enforces a digital form of self-imposed judgement, alongside the physical self-regulation that occurs in training.

However, it is important once again to consider the specific context of this study. My experiences here differ from those of the study's participants; my training and performances contribute to my financial security, so it is necessary to promote myself. Similarly, I must maintain a certain degree of physical capability in order to perform and thus must engage in physical self-regulation. Participants however frequently spoke of the use of the digital image as a souvenir of their aerial experience, a memento to remind them of their achievements, such as Ieva who stated 'When we watch this [video] I just know that I can like trust myself, I now know that I can trust more ... I prove something, that I can do this' (Ieva, personal communication, September 2017). They spoke fondly of the footage and photographs gathered over the course of the project, encouraged by their progress as evidenced by the digital documentation that enabled them to compare the images of their first session with those of their final performance. Participants found pleasure in sharing their digital images with colleagues and peers and in being seen by others. One participant stated: 'It's actually being able to show people what you're doing ... that's nice as well ... just having the clips to prove that I did actually do it' (Annie, personal communication, February 2019). Another participant expressed the value of 'Having photographs and showing people what we could do as people who hadn't necessarily done something like this before' (Hannah, personal communication, September 2017). Their positive responses to the use of the digital image in relation to their self-perception, where the digital image offered an affirmation of what they could achieve, led me to reappraise my own use of digital media in my practice research. These ideas of taking pleasure in being seen led me to consider performing arts scholar Rebecca Schneider's concept of 'the interrupting third eye' (1997, p. 86) discussed in her text *The Explicit Body in Performance*. In a discussion of feminist performance Schneider argues that 'The "seen" takes on an agency of her own' in

a 'mutual recognition between seer and seen' (1997, p. 86, emphasis in original). Dobson also explores Schneider's notion of the third eye in her analysis of women's use of social media networks which she says 'allows both young women and their viewers to enter into double positions of seer and seen simultaneously' (2015, p. 73). Dobson argues that 'by taking pleasure from *seeing their viewers see them*, the clear-cut object-subject binary is thrown into confusion' (2015, p. 72, emphasis in original). Participants' pleasure derived from sharing their digital images and enjoyment of being seen disrupts the notion of the female body as simply an object. In being active in their enjoyment of their images, participants flipped this binary on its head; they felt appreciated for their achievements and more importantly appreciated themselves for their achievements, rather than focusing on self-perceived lacks.

In discussing digital media use within performance pilot study participants were particularly interested in these ideas of the gaze and the contradictions within aerial circus that they had experienced. For example, they discussed the qualities of grace and ease that are often presented during performance compared to the level of strength and effort required and at times pain felt in the body during training. Lottie discussed the idea of these contrasting perspectives of the performer and the audience member and was interested in 'the audience gaze versus what the performer is going through'. She discussed 'the reality versus the beautiful spectacle of it all ... [and] who is the performance for and who's the audience and who is benefitting and who is watching' (Lottie, personal communication, September 2017). Many study participants also discussed these conflicting representations compared to the experience of training aerial circus skills, with one participant stating 'you're gritting your teeth cause it hurts so much cause a silk's digging into your back, and it just looks so graceful ... it's almost like a polar opposite' (Lucy, personal communication, January 2019). It is these ideas of the contradictions within representation and experience that I began to explore within my practice research as a result of reflective dialogue with participants. Notions of the gaze, of taking pleasure in being seen and of ensuring that the audience are aware I am being watched became a thread through my practice research explored using the body and digital media. Rather than offering a form of self-regulation, digital media became a site of pleasure and offered an opportunity to reappropriate the female image. I used digital technologies within my performances to disrupt ideas of the gaze and binary relationships between the audience member and the performer, as prompted by discussions with participants.

### **Iterations of Practice Research**

The combination of digital media technologies with aerial circus performance aims to extend the understanding of participants' lived experiences of aerial circus. My performances offer multiple perspectives to reflect the contradictions at the heart of being a young woman today and to reflect the paradoxes within representation and experience. Mirroring society's increasing reliance on digital technologies, there has been a growth in performance which integrates such technologies. Digital performance scholar Steve Dixon discusses the increase in live performance arts that use digital technologies to 'play a key role' (2007, p. 3, emphasis in original) as opposed to simply supporting the performance. Within my practice research performances, digital technologies aim to augment the performance by allowing me to explore ideas of self-perception in my work. My performances aim to provide audience members with a deeper connection to the embodied knowledge of the performer and to the collective narrative developed as a result of the parallel participant-based/practice approach.



**Figure 1: Watt, Carolyn. "Point of view video screenshot."  
April 2018. Video screenshot.**

The first development of this practice research was presented at the four-day international conference 'Imagineers in Circus and Science: Scientific Knowledge and Creative Imagination', Canberra, Australia, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018. This piece took the form of a conference style presentation and screening of a point of view aerial video (Figure 1) developed as a result of the pilot study findings which revealed a focus on what the body

could achieve as opposed to how it looked. The video integrated an early version of the audio sound track that runs throughout my practice research which was created by sound artist Vida Vojić in response to excerpts from pilot study participant interviews and that includes sounds of the body such as breathing and the heartbeat to emphasise the bodily experience of this physical practice. An excerpt of Lottie's interview was incorporated into this video where she discusses the impact depression has upon her feelings of self-perception: 'when depression tells you you're not going to enjoy stuff and that you're not worth having that enjoyment' (Lottie, excerpt of interview audio in video, September 2017). Lottie emphasises the value of her experience in enabling her to do something for herself as opposed to listening to the voice of depression telling her otherwise. This first iteration of practice research enabled me to explore the idea of doing something for yourself as opposed to being watched, an idea developed by pilot study participants. The use of the point of view camera offered the aerialist's perspective of movement, where the gaze is turned outwards, as opposed to making a spectacle of the female body in order to explore notions of Schneider's 'the interrupting third eye' (1997, p. 86).



**Figure 2: Eaton, Richard. "Be My (Body) Guest."  
May 2018. Photograph. (Courtesy of the XR Circus project).**

The second manifestation of practice research titled *Be My (Body) Guest* was developed and performed as part of the 'XR Circus: Extraordinary Circus' research project

in Brighton 21<sup>st</sup> May 2018 (Figure 2). *Be My (Body) Guest* considered contrasting audience perspectives of the female aerialist, exploring the notion of the gaze through live aerial performance, 360-degree video, point of view video, projection and live streaming. This piece is positioned within a growing body of contemporary circus work that aims to challenge ideas of the spectacle, the female body in circus and long-standing representations of women in circus. In a discussion of female-led circus companies Burton-Morgan argues 'Circus can be a powerful tool here because at its beating heart, circus is an artform that elevates the human body' (2018). She continues to indicate that celebrating female bodies 'for their strength, for their skills, [and] for their ability' offers an opportunity to transcend 'objectification' (Burton-Morgan, 2018) where, rather than objectifying the performer, the focus is on 'the person who can do these things rather than the action' (Murphy, interviewed by Peschier, 2019). My practice research is influenced by a number of key practitioners with the aim of celebrating the female body and disrupting typical ideas of the gaze. With the use of digital technologies to create a multi-layered experience influenced by the work of transmedia artist Simon Wilkinson. Wilkinson (2018) combines techniques from gaming, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, electronic music and theatre in order to create a non-linear narrative and immersive audience experience in his events and online experiences, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. I was interested here in creating a multi-layered experience through the combination of different digital technologies to disrupt the gaze and invite the audience to be active in spectating by asking them to choose their viewpoint. Ideas of the gaze are also explored in the contemporary circus piece *No Show*, directed by Elle Dubois (2018). *No Show* combines physical feats, narrative and speech to explore performers' identities which often remain hidden behind a masked smile and sequined costume. Dubois challenges expectations of the female body in circus 'of sexiness, beauty, and femininity of a societally dominant male gaze' (Nice, 2018) through disrupting typical circus narratives by presenting the all-female cast's personal experiences of circus and performance rather than simply displaying their bodies as spectacle. Another performance to influence my thinking was the collaborative contemporary circus show *Inside Out* (2018) devised by hand balancer Natalie Reckert and creative technologist Mark Morreau. This show draws upon Reckert's personal history, her physical experiences of circus performance and tales of her childhood. She provides an honest and at times comedic account of a hand balancer's movements, using her voice, her body, video projection and live videography supported by Morreau to create layers of

meaning. Both Dubois (2018) and Reckert and Morreau (2018) discuss the idea of the spectacle as a masquerade and aim to draw attention to the performer's lived experience of circus, playing with audience perception and expectations of the female performer.

With *Be My (Body) Guest* I was in part staging my own body in negotiation with ideas of femininity, notions of the female aerialist and the gaze. The aesthetic drew upon traditional aerial costume and movement style, offering a performance of the feminine masquerade depicting 'hegemonic notions of femininity' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 158) such as grace, elegance and beauty. Yet at the same time my costume revealed my muscular arms and back: the physical strength that enables me to move with ease in the air and display my skills and abilities. This performance presented conventional ideas of femininity through aesthetics and movement style, yet at the same time confused binary ideas of gender through the embodiment of strength, power and control challenging 'traditional notions of woman as weak, fragile and soft' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 40). The combination of the live projection, the point of view live stream, and 360-degree point of view video experience aimed to evoke multiple and disrupted gazes of the female body. In entering Dobson's notion of the 'double positions of seer and seen' (2015, p. 73) the use of digital technologies in this performance ensured the audience were aware the performer was aware she was being watched. The almost comical headpiece displaying the 360-degree video/point of view camera provided a constant visual reminder that the performer is not only aware she is being watched, but also invited the audience to consider the performance from her perspective. In this sense, the integration of digital media extended the invitation to the audience member to look in different ways at the female body, but also to consider the experience of the female performer.





**Figure 3: Watt, Carolyn. "Bending Over Backwards."  
June 2018. Video screenshot. (Courtesy of the B.Collective).**

The third development of practice research was a performance piece titled *Bending Over Backwards* (Figure 3) developed in tandem with *Be My (body) Guest*. However where *Be My (Body) Guest* explored ideas of the female body, the gaze and digital media technologies in performance, *Bending Over Backwards* provided a physical consideration of Harris' idea of the 'can-do girl' (2004) and the female body as participating in late modernity. This was a solo contortion and aerial hoop performance, as part of the social circus group B.Collective's 'Friday' show performed in Brighton 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2018. The show was a 40-minute group performance piece based on working in an office: a tongue in cheek, playful and comedic piece including group dances, character work, narrative, aerial and contortion performances. I struggled initially with this concept. I and one other member of the group were the only two to work in an office environment and neither of us were having a positive experience within our work lives at this point. I found it difficult to develop my character as it felt too much a mirror of my current situation. In response to the theme, I developed a contortion and aerial hoop act based on bending over backwards, being pulled in different directions and being overloaded with work. As with the cast of Dubois' *No Show* (2018) and Reckert and Morreau's *Inside Out* (2018), this performance asked me to perform my own identity, removing the mask of glitter and sequins I usually don in my commercial performance work, to reveal the real person underneath.

Gender theorist Judith Butler argues that 'the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to understand how a cultural convention is embodied

and enacted' (1988/1997, p. 408). Butler's ideas of the performative body in culture can be applied to the more literal and theatrical performing body through the use of dramatization and a physical exploration of possibilities. In a discussion of the performing body Tait says 'her actions are verbs, and movement sequences become phrases where the breath is used as punctuation. The physical theatre performer trains her muscles, her ligaments, her reflexes, her fears into the shape of dramatic action' (1994, p. 85). In creating this movement piece, I adapted an old work dress and turned it into a leotard, combined with some stretch trousers and a work jacket. For the first time I performed wearing my glasses, I was myself on stage, playing a caricature of myself. The body I had spent years creating, training the strength and control to move through these contorted positions, embodied Harris' ideas of the 'can-do girl' (2004). This performance enabled me to 'problematize the context' (Spry, 2001, p. 715) in which I felt overloaded and overburdened in the workplace. I bent over backwards to serve my colleagues tea which was balanced on my stomach, carefully walking one step at a time so as not to drop the tray. I rolled through the splits to tidy up the office mess, demonstrating ultimate flexibility and willingness to appease my colleagues. I sat in a chest stand to file the papers, taking individual responsibility for the collective mess that had been created. Ultimately, I reached the aerial hoop, to have a moment of escapism, before having to collect colleagues' mugs once again and return to 'the ranks of the successful' (Harris, 2004, p. 114) by joining the workforce. This performance embodied Bordo's argument that in order to participate in the workforce, women must personify traits that are typically perceived as masculine, such as control and discipline (1993/1997, p. 96), which in my case were demonstrated through my disciplined circus body. However, the traditionally feminine ideas of softness and flexibility were simultaneously presented during this performance through the liveness that contortion demands.

At the same time as exploring ideas of the female body in the workforce, this piece furthered my understandings of social circus. Community and belonging were key themes that arose out of participants' interviews, and like them I found myself experiencing notions of trust and support through collective endeavour. Like Bunsell's female bodybuilding participants, this social circus group offered an opportunity for 'identity restoration ... through self-affirming interactions with appreciative and 'like-minded' others' (2013, p. 157, emphasis in original) in contrast to the isolating and individualised experience of my workplace at that time. Additionally, like the participants of Spiegel and Parent's study, I



too felt I had found my 'circus family' (2017, p. 9). Through physically working together towards a common goal I experienced what Spiegel describes as 'kinesthetic sociality' (2016, p. 52). Through the shared physical experience of group dances, ensembles and interactions I felt celebrated in what we as a group could achieve together, but also what I could achieve as an individual, increasing a sense of both personal and collective self-worth.

*Be My (Body) Guest* and *Bending Over Backwards*, although two quite different practice research pieces, enabled exploration of the theories explored throughout this thesis in dialogue with the pilot study participants' experiences. Both performances, although under different guises, explored ideas of female expectation and the idea of the neoliberal super girl. The body in *Be My (Body) Guest* inhabited ideas of self-possession and questioned ideas of the feminine masquerade as a positive, self-authorship and ownership of the female body as spectacle. While the body in *Bending Over Backwards* occupied a lack of agency and anxiety, jumping through hoops to illustrate willingness, hard work and self-responsibility. The metaphorical element of circus performance enabled a physical exploration of these critical ideas, where the body became an instrument of research and a data gatherer.



**Figure 4: Watt, Carolyn. "Final event, installation."  
June 2019. Video screenshot. (Filmed by Luca Di-Maio)**



**Figure 5: Watt, Carolyn. "Final event, vocal aerial performance."  
June 2019. Video screenshot. (Filmed by Luca Di-Maio)**

The final iteration of practice research titled *Exploring Female Identities Through Social Aerial Circus and Digital Media*, illustrated in Figure 4 and 5, took place on the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2019 at a private event at the University of Portsmouth; this performance was an amalgamation and development of the previous works. The event offered an opportunity for participants to come together in a celebration of their achievements and reflected upon both my own and participants' lived experiences of aerial circus and the role of digital imagery within this. The combination of the performance seminar, vocal aerial silks performance and multi-media installation format questioned the role of the body as a repository and enabled a demonstration of embodied knowledge, a reflective account, but still questioning and exploring.

The multi-media installation consisted of an audio recording of my voice played on repeat as audience members entered the space. This was a recording of an early diary excerpt: a verb list describing my physical experience of aerial practice. A lilac set of silks were displayed with these same words printed and embroidered onto the fabric, adding further layers of meaning as the words became embedded in the material. A set of white silks and red silks took centre stage next to each other in the studio; the white silks printed and embroidered with participants' quotations, the red silks the performance silks. Several videos that documented the research process were projected onto different surfaces: the floor, the walls and the aerial hoop. These offered alternative perspectives of the research process and created multiple layers of knowledge. The final addition to the installation was the 360-degree point of view video experience, where audience members were invited to experience the main study's final performance event. Audience members were invited to

take off their shoes, step onto the crash mat and sit in the aerial silk loop, to feel the discomfort and the squeeze of the fabric closing in around their hips. A simple Virtual Reality headset and phone was then placed upon the audience member's head to enable them to experience a short aerial sequence from participant's perspective via the 360-degree point of view video.

My vocal aerial silks performance was influenced by Murphy's *Contra* (2017; 2019): a performance lecture combining narrative, aerial rope performance and stand-up comedy. Murphy quite literally puts the female body on display in this piece, entering the stage naked, to take to the microphone and recount her experiences of her body. Using her body and voice Murphy challenges notions of the female body as on display and questions how the body is meant to be looked at. Like Dubois (2018) and Reckert and Morreau (2018), Murphy draws upon lived experience and moves beyond the spectacle and the typical perception of the glamorous female aerialist. In contrast to the female circus performers who framed my early perceptions of circus as a young girl Murphy refrains from using costume, makeup or feminine gestures to create a mask of the spectacular. Although as a young girl I had considered the typical glamorous glitzy female circus performers to be unapologetic and unashamed in their bodily display, Murphy reveals a different representation of the female circus body: honest, forceful and deeply personal.

This practice research event raised questions around these contradictions in female experience and representation, as became apparent during the screening of the participant programme video. While my own physical performance refrained from the use of costume, makeup or stylised feminine movement, I did not wish to dismiss participants' enjoyment of aerial practice and engagement in fantasies of freedom through the spectacular. As argued earlier, the aerial studio environment offered participants' temporary respite from judgement, where they felt able to explore their identity through costume, makeup and movement in a safe space. As previously discussed, following the screening of the participant video, a male attendee asked participants if they had considered if the aesthetics chosen could be perceived as 'glamorous and sexy'. Participants' responded by identifying the social aerial circus programme to have created a safe space where they felt supported by their peers and able to take pleasure in playing with costume and aesthetics. They discussed how they had not considered how they may look to outsiders and expressed their view that their aerial performance was for themselves as opposed to others. This discussion highlights the 'tension between women's lived bodily experience and the

cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences' (Conboy, Medina, Stanbury, 1997, p. 1). Due to hegemonic notions of femininity, the participants' performances could be perceived to be enactments of heteronormative feminine ideals, yet participants' experiences focused on ideas of strength, power and alterity. In this respect, I question if the screening of the participant video detracted from participants' experience where they felt their aerial practice was for them, rather than to be viewed by others. I question whether the use of digital media in this context led to the participants becoming 'spectacle, as object of look' (Kuhn, 1988/1997, p. 206), unable to escape the male gaze and judgement from others; or rather by having participants present to respond to such a query, led to these women being considered as subjects rather than objects because they were able to voice their opinions. These queries raise valuable questions around the use of the digital image, where on the one hand when authored by participants they cited feelings of ownership and control, yet on the other hand when presented in another context to a different audience the intentions can be skewed, and representations perceived differently.

The physical performance element of the event sought to embody the collective narrative developed throughout this research. Carter indicates that 'Aerialists often present their bodies anonymously, and silently' (2014, p. 98). As a physical performer, I am used to putting my body on display and inviting the audience to look, however until this study I always did so anonymously hiding behind my performer identity. I am not used to using my voice or integrating text with physical practice, so this was new to me. The strategy of adapting the text in the form of participant quotations printed and embroidered onto the aerial fabric where the words became materialised, and the use of the voice, became my instruments of the performance. Where I not only 'sought to create a movement metaphor' (Carter, 2014, p. 98) but a vocal representation also. The performance of autoethnography blurred the lines between the written word and the body, where Spry argues that 'The performance of autoethnography corporeally manifests the dialogical praxis of critical theory and the performing body' (2001, p. 718). The incorporation of the voices of the participants, where I quite literally performed and momentarily embodied their words, combined with my own autoethnographic writings, provided a resolution to combining the theory with the corporeal nature of circus performance. Spry argues that 'Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience. In

interpreting the autoethnographic text, readers feel/sense the fractures in their own communicative lives' (2001, p. 712). The incorporation of the words and utterances into the effort and strain of performing gave the words new meaning and significance. Participants at times during their interviews did struggle to articulate their physical experiences of aerial circus and the effort in uttering the quotations during the physical performance reflected this struggle. Aerial circus is a visceral performance and evokes within audience members a kinaesthetic response (Tait, 2005a, p. 141; Holmes, 2016, p. 104). Within this practice research piece audience members were invited to not only read and touch the words inscribed on the aerial fabric, but to feel the words through combined autoethnographic and physical performance. These words that live within my body, the embodied knowledge developed as a result of this study, were felt by audience members as I climbed and twisted my way around the aerial silks evocative of a set of vocal chords. The colours of the lighting and aerial silks within the space, although selected to mirror the colours of the main study's performance event, evoked a sense of the anatomical body. The combination of pink, lilac, purple and red fabric were reminiscent of skin and flesh. While the hanging sets of aerial silks and draped fabric were suggestive of muscle tissue and tendons.

The event brought to the forefront the female body in order to consider 'real, fleshy, corporeal bodies' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 161) in developing knowledge to authentically represent female experience. Participants often discussed feeling a disconnect or a separation from their bodies, as expressed by Charlie who said: 'it's easy to just forget your body' (personal communication, February 2019). The intimate performance environment meant that the audience were much closer to me than is typical for aerial performance, which is often performed at greater height and with more distance between the audience member and performer. This meant that in some instances during the performance I was at eye level with audience members who, at times, were close enough for me to reach out and touch. The squeeze of the silks around my waist, the sound of the rigging as I dropped, the sweat on my skin, all became more visible and prominent in this performance drawing attention to the female body and my lived experience in that moment. The combination of the voice and the movement sought to emphasise the contradictions running throughout this thesis, where the voice demonstrated when a movement was particularly strenuous or the fabric particularly tight around my waist; experiences that I can normally mask with a flourish and a smile. The event explored participants' experiences discussed in the

following two chapters and sought to communicate the reflective dialogue between the participant-based studies and practice research. The ideas engaged within this thesis are embodied in the event and shared in that moment with the participants and with the audience to ensure the words were heard.

## **Chapter 3: Gendered Physicality and Female Bodily Capacity**

It was another thing to be able to actually carry your own weight ... cause I was way heavier than [anything] you'd ever carry normally. It's not carrying shopping, pulling yourself up somewhere, and even though my legs were no way straight, I could actually get myself ... (Laughter) ... for a little while I was not making contact [with the floor] and it was just my arms doing it and that was like, ye actually, I'm strong. (Annie, personal communication, February 2019).

This chapter is the first of two to explore the participant-based findings analysed in dialogue with the practice research. I first provide an overview of the participant studies, developed in line with social circus pedagogy, and outline the qualitative research methods adopted. Next, I consider societal expectations and notions of empowerment as understood by participants, framed by the theoretical propositions discussed throughout this thesis. The central aim of this chapter is to explore participants' experiences of aerial circus training and performance with a focus on strength, muscularity, pain and bodily markings as having the potential to challenge traditional notions of femininity, and ideas of embodied trust and capacity as a result of developing an informed relationship with one's body. This discussion offers insights into participants' physical experience of aerial circus within a social circus context. In the previous chapter I explored autoethnographic reflections and iterations of practice research developed as a result of working with participants; these two chapters draw on participants' voices and experiences based on observation, survey results and interviews. I located the discussion of practice research first in order to ground the practice as central to this thesis. It was practice and autoethnographic reflection that enabled the analysis of the participant studies.

### **Overview of Participant-based Studies**

In tandem with my practice research I worked with two different groups of women aged eighteen to thirty-five who had little or no experience of aerial circus training. I developed a social aerial circus programme that involved the cultivation of digital media production skills, including photography, videography, graphic design and blogging interconnected with physical training. It was following the pilot study that I came to realise that the integration of digital media provided more than simply a means of digital skills acquisition for participants; it evolved as a method for participants to document, reflect upon and represent their experiences of social aerial circus as will be discussed in the following

chapter. I led two programmes: one pilot study July – October 2017 working with six women, and one main study July 2018 – February 2019 working with eight women<sup>3</sup>. In line with social circus pedagogy both programmes worked towards ‘developing a performable routine out of the skills that each participant has learned’ (Cadwell, 2018, p. 23), to be performed at an internal performance event. These events provided an end goal for participants to work towards and motivation to develop their aerial skills. Similarly, in keeping with social circus pedagogy, participants to an extent led the direction of the programme development, a common ‘cornerstone of social circus’ (Cadwell, 2018, p. 31), where participants selected the digital media they wished to engage with and the format of their performance event to ensure a participant-focussed approach.

In total, eighteen women took part in the programmes, although four women left at various stages of the process due to personal circumstances, with the remaining fourteen participants completing the programmes. The studies were advertised across university social media networks and via local community groups affiliated with the PONToon project. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged eighteen to thirty-five at the time of participation and self-identify as female. All participants were able-bodied, although one participant had Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and suffered joint pain as a result. All participants were white, which is perhaps not surprising in Portsmouth, UK, which has a population consisting of 84% White British and 4.3% White Other according to the 2011 census which is carried out every ten years (Hampshire County Council, 2011). Most of the participants were heterosexual and in relationships, although this was not something questioned in the process it inevitably came up during conversations. Of the fourteen women who completed the programmes, two were self-employed, five were in full-time employment, one was in part-time employment, three were in full-time education, two were in part-time education and one was a full-time mother, additionally three of the participants had children. Half of the completing fourteen participants were connected to the University of Portsmouth, either as a graduate, student or staff member. The programmes primarily took place on university campus so this may have attracted staff and students, whilst pilot study participants were recruited solely through university networks explaining the high number of university related participants. With an initial focus on female empowerment and digital media engagement the activity and recruitment leaflet may have appealed to women interested in developing their self-confidence, fitness and

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<sup>3</sup> Both the pilot study and main study programmes can be found in the appendix 4 and 5



digital media aptitudes. Favourable ethical opinion was granted for both studies by the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries Ethical Committee and can be found in appendix 6 and 7. Participant anonymisation was not used in this research due to the nature of the visual documentation meaning it may be possible for participants to be identified, however participants' names have been changed throughout this thesis in relation to direct quotations and references.

I did not undertake formal 'acceptance interview[s]' as discussed by Spiegel (2016, p. 54) used in the social circus 'Creation Intensives' led by Cirque Hors Piste (Spiegel, 2016, p. 54) to identify if participants could volunteer in response to a hierarchy of need. However, influenced by the concept of the 'acceptance interview' (Spiegel, 2016, p. 54) I did meet with each prospective participant individually to discuss the project, information sheet and consent form to ensure participants had the opportunity to ask questions and understand what participation involved. Spiegel indicates that 'acceptance interview[s]' provide 'an opportunity for instructors and community workers to learn about the social and artistic goals of the participants, facilitating a participant-centred process' (2016, p. 54). Spiegel says this interview, although less formal in the case of this study, offers 'an initiatory act of self-reflection and a verbalizing of goals and desires' (2016, p. 54). During our first meetings I spoke with participants, both individually and as a group, to identify participants' interests and ask them what they hoped to gain from participation. This was also mirrored in the pre-participation survey in order to understand participants' expectations of the programme.

I did not ask participants for specific information on socio-economic status but did gather information on education and employment which can provide indication of class positioning. Although sociologist Simon Stewart argues 'that there is little evidence that could back up the idea of a cohesive, self-defining middle-class grouping' (2010, p. 17) the information gathered indicates participants can be considered 'of the so-called middle classes' (Stewart, 2010, p. 17) with 'similarly high levels of access to economic and cultural resources' (Stewart, 2010, p. 3). As previously recognised, participants self-identified in early meetings that engaging in a programme with a focus on digital media skills acquisition could be beneficial for their future employment opportunities. In describing 'can-do girls' Harris argues:

They seize the opportunities made available within the new economy and make projects of their work selves from an early age. New resources and efforts are

required for young people to succeed in the new economy, and these can-do girls are represented as particularly able in applying themselves to maximise their future chances in the changing world of work. (2004, p. 18)

Participants were acutely aware of the growing demand for digital skills in the labour market and saw this as an opportunity to develop their skills to apply to their current employment and education situations. Participants could be considered as Harris' 'can-do girls' (2004) with the ability to seek out new opportunities and adapt to the changing economic landscape. Conversely, Harris also considers the 'personal problems of can-do girls' (2004, p. 33) which she argues materialise as a lack of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-belief and resilience (2004, p. 33). Harris continues to say that 'What is constructed here is the never-good-enough girl who must perpetually observe and remake herself' (2004, p. 33). During our early meetings and in response to the pre-participation surveys participants cited increasing their fitness, meeting new people and developing their self-confidence as motivations for engaging with the programme. Several participants spoke with me about having anxiety and/or depression, and many of them discussed a lack of body confidence and self-belief. One participant referred to 'that little nagging voice' in her head constantly telling her to work harder, while another participant stated 'I tend to put myself under a bit too much pressure' during a discussion around ideas of self-improvement. Considering Harris' argument and participants' motivations for engaging in the programme participants may also, to varying degrees, have considered themselves as the 'never-good-enough girl' (Harris, 2004, p. 33) seeking to better themselves in an environment of self-improvement.

In order to understand participants' experiences of aerial circus training and performance I adopted a mixed methods approach, combining practice research with qualitative methods which are more concerned with opinions and views as opposed to measurable outcomes as is typical of quantitative research. This multi-mode approach to research allows 'a fuller account by cross-referencing different kinds of evidence' (Nelson, 2013, p. 84), and enabled me to extract emerging themes from participants' experiences, connect the findings to the theories discussed throughout this thesis and form a narrative based on my own interpretations. I used a combination of surveys, interviews and observation, alongside the development of practice research, to gather data. The survey replicated questions used in Spiegel et al.'s social circus participant survey (2014), which aimed to explore the impact of social circus on 'participants' personal growth, social

inclusion and social engagement' (2014, p. 3), combined with my own questions on digital technologies, wellbeing and experience of circus. Participants were asked to complete the survey before participation (both studies), once during the middle of the programme (main study only) and finally at the end of the programme (both studies) to gather comparative data. Alongside the surveys, I interviewed thirteen of the participants, with one participant opting to respond to the questions via email. I chose to conduct open-ended semi-structured interviews to enable participants to speak freely and raise topics I may not have considered. To ensure participants felt comfortable the interviews took place in a location suitable to them and were approached as more of a discussion as opposed to a formal interview, although each interview was audio recorded and participants were aware the material would be transcribed and contribute to the research. The interview schedule guided the discussions, but also enabled me to react to participants' responses as the interviews meandered in different directions. Due to my experience of aerial circus I was able to relate to participants and share my own experiences as they asked me questions throughout, proving the interviews to be more conversational as we had developed rapport over the course of the programmes. The first section of the interview schedule included ice-breakers and a general discussion on their participation and interest in the programme. I asked participants exploratory questions in the second section of the interview, aimed at uncovering their emotional and physical experience of aerial circus training and performance. The third section concentrated on the combination of digital media production with aerial circus training and their opinions on media and online culture. Finally, the last section of the interview provided room for open discussion and an opportunity for participants to raise matters I had not considered. Many participants seemed to enjoy their interviews and a small number of participants even compared their interviews to therapy. Most of them thanked me for the opportunity to talk about their experiences and the opportunity to participate in the programme.

As with Leavy's description of ethnography, my approach required me to 'develop rapport with ... research participants, collaborate with them and embark on weighty and unpredictable emotional as well as intellectual processes' (2009, p. 6 – 7). I worked with participant groups over a relatively long period of time in each programme (four months in the pilot study and eight months in the main study), seeing each other weekly and in close physical contact due to the nature of aerial circus training and instruction. In order to develop this rapport, it was important for participants to know a little about my

experiences of aerial circus and motivation for this study. It was important to me that participants felt able to ask me questions and that they were aware I was reflecting upon my own experiences of aerial circus and media and online culture. I recognise that knowledge of my experiences may have influenced participants' opinions of their aerial training and performance. Similarly, the development of a positive rapport over the course of the process may have influenced participants' responses where they were supportive of me and the study. It is useful to highlight that I was of a similar age and demographic to participants which may have contributed to the development of rapport, where they felt able to relate to me due to similar shared life experiences.

### **Participants' Understandings of Societal Expectations and Empowerment**

[T]here is an awareness among young women that female bodily anxieties are intricately tied up with the need for social approval and more generally with the high value which society places on spectacularly coded styles of feminine beauty and sexuality, at the expense of other capacities. (McRobbie, 2009, p. 118)

Oh, I think that's just inbuilt isn't it? We're just taught from a very early age to associate what we look like with our achievement, that's the society thing that's just ingrained in us I think. And then as you get bigger and you grow up more and you see more and more pictures of women that tell you you're not good enough, you know, our entire, certainly our entire capitalist society is built around selling stuff to us because we don't look good enough, you know, so it's just something you can't get away from really I don't think. (Lottie, personal communication, September 2017)

These quotations highlight participants' awareness of living within a society bound by sexist expectations of hegemonic femininity and the bodily anxiety this can create. Lottie expresses her frustrations of living within a society driven by consumerism, which encourages feelings of inadequacy based on aesthetic qualities, where 'unprecedented value is placed on the youthful, trim and sexual body' (Shilling, 2003, p. 2 – 3). Many participants discussed the pressures of gendered ideals; they described expectations for women to be pretty, dainty and creative and felt men were expected to be strong, dominant and tough. Participants' discussions indicate that a 'naturalistic approach continues to exert considerable influence on popular images of the human body' (Shilling, 2003, p. 62). Although participants did not necessarily believe, agree or conform to these stereotypical notions of gender, they were quick to identify these as the normative expectations of the society within which they navigate. For the most part, participants also

voiced conflicting expectations of women. When asked to describe what it is like being a young woman today, many of the participants used phrases such as 'you can't win', 'it's a double-edged sword' and 'you're damned if you do, damned if you don't!' They discussed feeling pressure to have children and a career but felt judged regardless of their choice. Participants were highly aware of the role of media, and online media in particular, in enforcing such expectations, increasing levels of judgement and influencing normative expectations of femininity. Although participants discussed the value of digital devices and online platforms as increasing opportunities for communication and knowledge sharing, they primarily focussed on the regulatory power of the media. Charlie for example remembered 'looking at [images of] girls and thinking, oh I want to be that shape, oh I should be that shape' when she was younger and noted how images of women have become increasingly widespread as a result of online culture (personal communication, February 2019). Other participants commented on the media, and specifically social media, as promoting standardised expectations for women to maintain a slim, preened and beautiful aesthetic. Participants believed that society is taught to assess a woman's worth based on their appearance and emphasised the role of media and online culture in enforcing this. Many participants identified the detrimental impact media images can have on self-perception in promoting a specific feminine ideal, however at times felt at a loss as to how to escape such pressures.

Empowerment has been a continual thread throughout this study and so I sought to consider participants' understandings of this concept. The research evolved over the course of the process and through interaction with participants I came to the realisation that empowerment is a personal and complex notion to them. Sociologist Kerry Griffiths, in her text *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dancing* says that 'feminist arguments have defined empowerment as the gaining in agency for oneself or for others, pointing towards a neo-liberal approach, suggesting that women must empower themselves and gain control of their own lives' (2016, p. 126). Griffiths' description of neoliberal empowerment is aligned to Harris' argument that young women in late modernity 'are expected to be flexible, adaptable, resilient, and ultimately responsible for their own ability to manage their lives successfully' (2004, p. 8). Thus to be empowered in this context suggests success in managing one's life. Building on these ideas Bunsell emphasises the complexity of the notion of empowerment and describes it as a 'process ... rather than simply an event.' (2013, p. 9) In a discussion of bodily empowerment, which is

pertinent to this study, Bunsell identifies two defining aspects as 'Individual empowerment' which encompasses corporeal practices and experience (2013, p. 8) and 'Social empowerment' which includes cultural processes and experience (2013, p. 8). These ideas of bodily empowerment build upon Gill's argument that post-feminist discourse focuses on the body as a 'source of power' (2007, p. 149), where the body can be seen to offer a notional form of empowerment through self-management, self-control, and personal choice.

Discussions with participants revealed a prevailing neoliberal ideology of empowerment. When asked what empowerment meant to them, participants focused on ideas of individual potential, personal choice, self-belief, independence and self-reliance. Participants felt it important to enable women to develop these feelings and considered self-confidence as an essential aspect of empowerment. They frequently discussed how fostering feelings such as self-confidence through lived experience could be transferred to other life situations. For many participants, empowerment related to ideas of 'not caring what others think' and similar turns of phrase as well as the notion of feeling at 'peace with yourself' regardless of conforming to or actively rejecting hegemonic feminine ideals. As discussed, participants were aware of the high levels of judgement women face based on their choices, actions and appearance. They were conscious of living in a society which values a specific type of female aesthetic over other capabilities and attributes and thus empowerment to participants seemed to be more about the ability not to become overwhelmed by such pressures and expectations.

### **Female Muscularity: Strength, Pain and Bodily markings**

I quite enjoyed like noticing getting stronger, like I found that quite satisfying, cause I want to get strong anyway, like arms wise, and I hate just doing arms, like at the gym, I find that boring. Whereas doing that made you strong was like, quite fun ... I just don't really want to be like, weak, I just want to get strong like! But I found like, that was a fun way of doing it ... I guess like at the gym, if you're doing arms, you feel very like masculine, you feel very like judged. Especially cause I'm so small as well, I feel like people are like, what, why are you doing that? Whereas like, I feel like hoop and stuff, you get strong, but it's quite graceful, and you can like, perform it as much or as little as you want. (Viki, personal communication, January 2019)

Considering ideas of the female aerialist as representative of a strong powerful woman who challenges ideas of female inferiority, participants frequently used words such as 'power', 'fitness', 'strength', 'healthy' and 'strong' to describe their experience of aerial training and

performance. In contrast to some of Carter's aerial students who voiced their concerns at developing muscular bulk as a result of aerial training (2014, p. 92) participants actively found satisfaction in developing physical strength and muscles as expressed by Viki in the quotation above. Viki identifies feeling judged if perceived to be attempting to build her arm strength which she considers to be a masculine quality. However, Viki differentiates between her aerial training to regular gym or weight exercise due to the enactment of traditional feminine attributes such as grace which she felt could be performed at her choosing. Viki expresses both a desire to develop physical strength and muscularity in order to move away from ideas of weakness, but at the same time is conscious of being perceived by others as masculine. This discussion reveals the complexity of ideas of gender as considered by participants, where they identified satisfaction in developing muscles but were quick to recognise the performative elements of grace and beauty as intrinsically linked to aerial performance and notions of femininity.

As well as finding satisfaction in developing physical strength, participants frequently commented on the value of being able to 'lift themselves up' or 'pull themselves up'. Notably for many participants, physical strength and the ability to quite literally hold themselves up in their aerial practice equated to ideas of self-reliance. They expressed feelings of satisfaction in being able to lift or carry things for themselves as a result of their aerial practice and not having to rely on others; a few participants specifically referred to not needing male assistance. The realisation for Annie that she was able to hold her own weight in her arms, even if momentarily, was in her words 'a massive achievement'. According to Young, 'Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force' (1977/2005, p. 33). Aerial action facilitates the very movements described here by Young; it requires participants to lift their own weight, to pull themselves up onto equipment and into the air, to squeeze with their thighs and other body parts in different positions, to grasp and hold on with their hands and to twist their bodies in manoeuvres and during drops. Young says that 'When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing' (1977/2005, p. 33). Again, aerial action asks of participants to engage their bodies to their 'full possibilities' (Young, 1977/2005, p. 33). In considering Young's argument, these feelings of incapability were felt by most participants who consistently voiced feeling surprised at their own physical achievements within their aerial training.

In considering these ideas of gendered physicality, Young argues that 'For the most part, girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world' (1977/2005, p. 43). In addition to this Shilling contends that conventional 'gender ideologies' categorise 'bodily expansion' as male and 'bodily restriction' as female (2003, p. 59), with the female body encouraged to engage in passive activity and the male body in active physical development (2003, p. 97). Like Bunsell's analysis of the female bodybuilder, aerial action 'constructs a body that takes up space and demands attention' (2013, p. 40). Aerial training and performance challenges this notion of female restriction, it asks of participants to physically take up space, to move vertically through the air and to expand their bodies in developing muscular bulk but also in extending their limbs to stretch, bend and twist. Both Tait (2005a) and Allegranti (2011/2015) also investigate gender identity as conditioned by society in relation to risk taking and physical experience. Allegranti valuably discusses gendered physicality as developed from a young age and citing Orbach (2004) argues that females are treated with caution, while males are encouraged to engage in physical risk taking (2011/2015, p. 113). Additionally, Allegranti discusses a research participant's response to movement where the dancer comments 'it's really clichéd, but it's that idea that if you fall and you find that everything's OK and then you can go onto the next level' (2011/2015, p. 104). Participants discussed similar experiences in relation to the fear of falling in aerial training where ideas of letting go, falling and fear were wrapped up with notions of trust. Participants were naturally concerned about falling but expressed that through building their physical strength their perception of what they were capable of achieving was altered. By overcoming their fears and taking physical risks, they began to trust their bodies and in turn trust their choices and actions within their training.

In developing their physical strength, and learning about their body's capabilities in the process, they were engaged in a physical reorganisation of the body described by one participant as 'sorting yourself out' through corporeal movement. Young 'observed that women tend not to open their bodies in their everyday movements, but tend to sit, stand, and walk with their limbs close to or closed around them' (1977/2005, p. 40). Participants discussed the physical changes in their body as a result of their aerial training such as developing muscles they did not realise they had as well as the impact their training could have on their daily movements. Charlie for example described the following:

It's like I'll be walking and every now and again I'll remember to just hold my back



up a little bit more, just to move my legs a bit further and stuff, just to stretch a bit further, and that's actually stayed with me a little bit, and I think that's hugely beneficial, cause that's a habit, and it's hard to, it's easy to just forget your body. (Charlie, personal communication, February 2019)

As a result of her aerial training, Charlie became more aware of her body in her daily life. She found herself moving differently, her body was less restricted as she felt able to physically take up more space in her movements. Similarly, other participants commented on rolling their shoulders back and sitting up taller as a result of their increased bodily awareness, suggestive of an increase in '*dominance of space and enjoyment of self*' (Young, 2005, cited by Bunsell, 2013, p. 64, emphasis in original).

The bruises! (Laughter). I had the best set of bruises when I first did the drop, and I had to explain to [my partner], cause they were all up round here! [Gestures to inner thigh area] I was like, just so you know, it's aerial. But I was quite proud of my bruises in a weird way! (Laughter). It's like, look at these bad boys, look at what I did to myself! Yeah I kind of like it, cause it makes you feel like you're working for it, I guess! (Laughter). No pain no gain you know, it's kind of like a badge of pride. I kind of like the bruises. (Charlie, personal communication, February 2019)

Alongside finding gratification in muscular development, participants also expressed satisfaction with their newly acquired bodily markings in the form of bruises, burns and callouses as a result of the pressure and placement of the equipment on the body. Shilling indicates that 'Intense pain makes us acutely aware of our bodies as we search for its location and cause' (2003, p. 184). In experiencing and understanding pain participants developed an increased sense of bodily awareness through the process of learning what can be considered as 'good' or 'normal' pain and what is considered as 'bad' pain leading to injury. Sociologist Jillian Deri and social and health urban planning scholar-practitioner Wendy Mendes, in their reflective book chapter *Doing pain "right": The pleasures of pain in aerial dance*, discuss the positive association with pain and indicate that 'With pain comes positive emotional attachment linked to successful feats and ecstatic thrills, and mark is equated with satisfaction, not strife' (2012, p. 99). Consequently, within this study participants frequently commented on the high level of pain experienced during their aerial training; however, building on Deri and Mendes' research, participants also voiced their pleasure in these experiences. They discussed feeling in agony at times, frustrated when they realised that they could not push their bodies any further and described the intense pressure of the hard metal hoop against their skin or the aerial fabric closing in around their

waist. Nevertheless, they also discussed their satisfaction in the pain lessening as they practiced and in understanding what those feelings of pain meant and listening and responding to their bodies.

The experience of pain often heightened participants' sense of achievement, as by not only overcoming the fear of falling and letting go, they were also overcoming real physical pain in order to move forward with their training. As with their experience of being able to physically lift themselves up, participants discussed increased feelings of self-reliance and satisfaction as a result of being able to work through, cope with and manage their pain. Mendes discusses her experience of managing an injury through bodily control and says that this embodied experience of control led to increased feelings of empowerment and confidence (Deri & Mendes, 2012, p. 99). Likewise, participants compared their experiences of pain in their aerial training to a metaphor for life: in being able to work through the physical pain they indicated they felt more able to overcome other life challenges. Discussions with participants revealed a positive association with their aerial pain; to participants it often represented success, progress and ideas of self-control.

Deri and Mendes argue that participants can often find 'unexpected pleasure in the bruising, friction burns and abrasions that are regularly collected on the body (and missed in their absence) as a result of the practice' (2012, p. 95). They also say that 'bruises and abrasions are worn as badges of honour, for ourselves and our comrades' (Deri & Mendes, 2012, p. 101). Building on Deri and Mendes' findings, participants also described their bruises as 'badges of honour', where for them these bodily markings became visual evidence of hard work and at times a sign that they had the equipment in the correct positioning on their body. These findings draw similarities to Griffith's analysis of recreational pole dancing, where one of her research participants identified 'that bruising was a physical evidence of her hard work and perseverance' (2016, p. 90) and another 'used the term 'trophy' to describe her bruises ... they show that she is working hard' (2016, p. 91). Accordingly, many of the participants of this study spoke of being proud of their bruises, often discussing finding bruises in strange places on their body that they would take delight in explaining to their friends and partners as to how they got there. Several participants discussed quite literally toughening up their body and in turn their emotional resilience. Deri and Mendes describe this visual evidence collected upon the aerial body as 'the physical and psychic tattoos of my practice' (2012, p. 98). In this respect, for

participants, their aerial body became part of their identity, as they carried with them the visual evidence of their achievements, their physical signifiers of resilience. These were bodily markings they had taken ownership of, bruises and burns they had actively created through their aerial practice.

Moreover, Lindsey commented that the bodily markings she had collected signified 'that not all sport is going to be perfect and not everyone is going to be perfect at it, but it doesn't matter because you're doing it' (personal communication, January 2019). Griffiths argues in her analysis of recreational pole dancing that we live 'in a world where the female body is supposed to be flawless, perfect and unblemished' (2016, p. 89). The bodily markings collected meant that participants' bodies did not meet 'the current hegemonic Western bodily ideal of the young, slim and 'unmarked'' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 27, emphasis in original). Like the recreational pole dancers of Griffiths' research (2016, p. 89) participants of this study felt proud of their bruises and burns regardless of such notions of femininity. Participants expressed feelings of satisfaction in developing physical strength and power and actively embraced the development of bodily markings. The noticeable muscularity and strength, although not in line with society's conventional ideals of female attractiveness, provided for participants visible evidence of their hard work and dedication.

It is worth noting that female muscularity and fitness is gaining popularity in visual culture across media and online platforms as discussed by psychologist Marika Tiggemann and psychologist researcher Mia Zaccardo in their article exploring online culture and female body image (2015). Similarly, in a discussion of the sporting activity Cross Fit, media and cultural studies researcher Myra Washington and Cross Fit practitioner Megan Economides draw attention to the recent popularity of slogans such as 'strong is the new skinny' (2016, p. 150) and an increase in media material promoting strong athletic female bodies (2016, p. 149 – 153). In both articles the authors discuss that although female participants of sport may develop toned athletic bodies, often the images depicted still engage in homogenised feminine ideals such as the desire to be attractive to men (Washington & Economides, 2016, p. 152 – 153) and 'a relatively thin and toned figure' (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015, p. 62). Bessone argues that 'The conception of a fit, healthy, and responsibly looked after circus body goes beyond the absence of fat or muscular tone of contemporary consumerism' (2017a, p. 225). As with Bessone's discussion of the circus body (2017a, p. 225) participants' experiences of aerial circus training and performance focussed on the feeling of building strength and an informed relationship with their bodies.

The strength developed was a by-product of their training in order to achieve physical feats as opposed to adapting the body to look a certain way as discussed by Bessone who argues that 'body modification is more of a consequence of training than an explicitly searched for aim, like it could be in body building or fitness activities' (2017a, p. 230). Participants felt proud of what their body could achieve as opposed to focussing on the aesthetic results of their physical training.

### **Developing an Informed Relationship with the Body**

A key phrase repeated with disbelief in various iterations throughout the interviews and group discussions was 'I can', 'I could', 'I didn't think I could, but I did'. These expressions conveyed participants' consistent surprise at being able to achieve within their aerial training. Many of them described the satisfaction of their experience with phrases such as 'I think it was just actually being able to do something' and 'I think, it was just being able to do it, it was just achieving something that my brain was telling me I couldn't do.' In discussing female experience Young indicates the following: 'Typically, we lack an entire trust in our bodies to carry us to our aims' (1977/2005, p. 34). This notion of a lack of bodily trust certainly seemed apparent within most participants who doubted their capabilities. Young argues that 'Feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an "I can" and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed "I cannot"' (1977/2005, p. 36, emphasis in original). This correlates with Harris' concept of the 'never-good-enough girl' (2004, p. 33) where many of the participants harboured feelings of insufficiency.

The notion 'that dynamic activities such as heavy weight training can teach women to trust their bodies and to enjoy their physical competence and capabilities' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 114) can be applied to aerial circus training and performance. Annie introduced the notion of 'self-saying' to describe developing the ability to tell herself that she was 'doing ok' in her aerial training and performance. She indicated that this was an important moment for her as she usually relied on others for praise as opposed to believing in her own abilities. Similarly, another participant discussed her aerial training and performance as impacting upon 'the way I see myself ... I'm horribly clumsy so I never really thought I'd be much good at it.' However, following participation she said she felt 'more at peace' with herself, with her self-perceived clumsiness and self-perceived flaws. The physicality of aerial training and performance enabled participants to appreciate and find satisfaction in

their bodies. Rather than seeking validation from others, or indeed, berating themselves, participants learnt to self-congratulate through believing in their physical capacity. This was reflected during Lindsey's interview where she stated, 'essentially the only person holding me up is me ... it made me appreciate my body a bit more' and her catchphrase to the project became 'trust your body because it trusts you' (personal communication, January 2019). Lindsey spoke of the value of developing a relationship with her body and developing feelings of trust as a result of being able to pull herself up onto the equipment and transition through movements as her strength and confidence in the air developed. Similarly, Charlie compared her experience of aerial training to team development trust exercises based on falling into the arms of others. However, in aerial she felt she relied only on herself. She spoke of these moments of physical success as being a 'victory' having 'won a battle' against her mind. Charlie's use of language to describe her relationship between body and mind draws similarities to one of Bunsell's participant's experience of bodybuilding who states: 'The heavy, low reps – feel like a battle of wills between body and mental, as the mind and body are forced to work in harmony in full concentration' (2013, p.125).

[Before participation] I kind of felt, well out of touch with my body, I felt like I'd forgotten about it, I felt like I was in a different, a shell that wasn't mine, if you know what I mean ... my brain had grown but my body had grown in a different way from it rather than together, and this has just been massively beneficial to me, in becoming more cohesive again I guess? (Charlie, personal communication, February 2019)

This participant quotation emphasises Young's notion of a 'lack of body unity' (1977/2005, p. 38) where several participants voiced feeling a disconnect between their mind and body before participation in the programme. However, as Deri and Mendes say, 'Presence of mind and body are essential' (2012, p. 98) to aerial training. The women of this research found a sense of control in their aerial actions, taking their time and learning to consider their movements and listen to their bodies. Although only a short-term experience of aerial training as opposed to years, participants did begin to find this 'presence of mind and body' (Deri & Mendes, 2012, p. 98) leading a sense of bodily cohesion. Several participants alluded to this meditative state as discussed by Deri and Mendes (2012, p. 98), where although participants considered aerial to be a social activity, they felt it could also be an inward focussed practice. Kelsey describes her experience of being 'on another level', literally in terms of the height she had gained in climbing the silks

and figuratively in terms of her mental state. She associated this with feelings of freedom and peace. This correlates with Holmes' notion of the aerial body as 'a fantasy of transformation into a free body unfettered from worldly constraints' (2017, p. 311). For participants, gaining height and moving in the air enabled their bodies to feel free but also their minds as they entered a meditative state.

I definitely felt differently about my body because I was more aware of it being something that could achieve stuff rather than something that should just look a certain way. And, you know moving to that place where you can feel proud of your body for doing something rather than just ashamed cause it's not skinny enough. And so it was obviously shorter term than that, but it reminded me of those sorts of feelings, that made me think, actually yeah, this is what it felt like to be proud of what I can do physically rather than just ashamed of the way I am. (Lindsey, personal communication, September 2017)

As well as experiencing a physically free body in not being connected to the ground, participants also alluded to feelings of freedom as a result of feeling proud of what their bodies could achieve, as opposed to berating themselves for not adhering to hegemonic feminine ideals of thinness, where as indicated by Bartky 'women punish themselves too for the failure to conform' (1988/1997, p. 144). Notably several participants commented that they understood they were not necessarily doing the movements 'perfectly'. However, replicating 'perfect' movement was not the goal of the process. Participants were not attending sessions to become professional aerialists, but to experience aerial training and performance within a social circus context. Bessone indicates that 'circus bodies and circus acts are not shaped and composed to be compared to other circus bodies and acts, like it happens with sport bodies and performances which are inscribed within a specific (bourgeois) social order' (2017a, p. 20). Although this statement is arguable with regard to commercial performance where circus bodies are frequently compared and judged against specific ideals, within social circus initiatives individuality is celebrated. Therefore, within this study participants were encouraged to find their own movement patterns, safely of course, but they did not have to aspire to a specific ideal in their aerial practice<sup>4</sup> nor a specific aesthetic. In this sense participants were able to find satisfaction in their bodies as

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<sup>4</sup> There are of course movement patterns and positions beginners to aerial learn first, before advancing to the next stage. However, participants did not have to maintain a regimented training regime or attempt to match each other in the same movement exactly (as with gymnastics, for example). In this sense participants were appreciated for their different body types and understood that each body was individual and could move in a slightly different way.

a result of their physical achievements.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered insights into participants' lived experience of aerial circus training and performance. These findings suggest that aerial circus training and performance offers participants the opportunity to embody notions of 'power, discipline, and flexible nonconformity' (Davis, 2011, p. 209) that have come to represent the female body in circus. Physical strength is an integral aspect to participants' experiences, where they felt the development of muscularity enabled them to contest feelings of weakness building on the notion of the female aerialist as challenging ideas of female inferiority. Aerial movement permitted participants to take up space, literally in moving vertically through the air, but also physically in developing bodily bulk and extending their limbs, contesting gendered ideas of the restricted female body. Feelings of satisfaction were enhanced through their collection of bodily markings which they felt was evidence of their hard work and took pride in sharing with peers, thus challenging ideas of the female body as an unblemished entity. Participants spoke of increased self-confidence as a result of what their body can achieve as opposed to focussing on self-perceived aesthetic lacks or limits, as enforced by sexist ideals. These findings suggest that aerial training and performance to a degree offered participants a means to challenge feelings 'of insufficiency, of never being good enough' (Bordo, 1993/1997, p. 91). Participants' considerations of empowerment were broadly in line with neoliberal ideology, with an emphasis on individuality, independence and personal choice. Working within participants' concept of empowerment, aerial circus training and performance offered participants a notional form of liberation, where through physical practice they were able to embody ideas of self-reliance and control.

## **Chapter 4: Embodiment of Circus Representations and Self-representation**

I think it's this very kind of, mystical kind of magical kind of thing, that is very aspirational ... I guess like an interpretation of kind of grace and elegance, very feminine I would say, and kind of represents kind of strong female figures I would say. Yeah, just the elegance of it and kind of the finesse that goes with it and the control, but also on the flip side it does bring masculine elements to it as well in as much as your strength that you need to have to you know, pull the shapes and do all the tricks and things, so I think it combines, but I would say it was predominantly very feminine and exotic. (Lucy, personal communication, January 2019)

If in the previous chapter I argued that aerial action enabled participants to embody notions of strength, power and trust, then this chapter considers participants' embodiment of circus representations and the use of digital media to explore ideas of self-representation. In the first part I consider participants' experiences in relation to notions of circus as a site of community, alterity and escape; in the second part I consider the role of the digital image, ideas of self-perception and self-authorship. Central to this chapter is participants' experiences of social circus and aerial performance, and their use of digital media to represent their experiences in order to understand the impact of combining these two disciplines.

### **An Environment Free from Judgement**

Ideas of community and belonging were an important focus of participant interviews where they used words such as 'bonding', 'camaraderie', 'family', 'social' and 'support' to describe their experience of social aerial circus. These findings build on existing research which cites the familial quality (Spiegel et al., 2015, p. 71) and increased 'sense of belonging' (Spiegel & Parent, 2017, p. 9) as key outcomes of participation in social circus. Participants indicated that the performance event and following digital workshops provided them with an end goal and a common purpose; they suggested that these shared experiences brought the group together evoking a sense of community. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, whose research explores the concept of a community of practice, argue that the sharing of a common goal enables the development of a shared tacit understanding, where participants 'become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together' (2002, p. 5). The social and supportive nature of social aerial circus enabled participants to develop a sense of togetherness as they worked towards a common goal, sharing, learning and interacting with one another. One participant discussed developing an appreciation of 'the



relationships that have been built up through going through the process' and another highlighted the value of having 'an hour and a half a week talking to other women who were all there to experience the same thing'. These ideas of shared experience and peer appreciation became important characteristics of participants' experiences which they felt led to a sense of community described by one participant as 'you form like a social circle, you feel like a family'. Many participants cited the supportive atmosphere as integral to developing feelings of self-confidence where they discussed the value in supporting each other emotionally but also physically with partner exercises in helping each other onto the equipment or guiding each other's movements. This is described by Spiegel as 'kinesthetic sociality' developed 'through shared physical acts of performance' (2016, p. 52). Similarly, Bolton argues that circus training can present 'a context for non-abusive, consensual touch' (2004, p. 38). The use of physical touch and tactile support in aerial circus training contributes to the experience of support and togetherness. In physically sharing their experiences participants were able to form not only an emotional bond, but a literal bond too.

Contributing to participants' feelings of belonging was the experience of connecting with other women in an all-female space. Several participants commented that all female groups can often be quite 'bitchy' but as a result of the mutual support developed in their aerial training, they felt that this was not the case in this instance. Additionally, participants expressed the value in an all-female group in developing self-confidence, in being free of external judgement they felt able to enjoy their physical practice without feeling ashamed of their appearance or bodily functions such as sweating or menstruation. The supportive environment developed offered participants momentary relief from societal expectations that ask of women to 'manage and conceal menstruation' (Shilling, 2003, p. 34) and control other bodily functions.

The more we sat, and you know, just chatted as a group, not necessarily about the project, but we'd always have a chat about life in general before we even started the session, so being comfortable with the people you were with, you just kind of, let go! ... everyone was appreciative of everybody else's opinions, and we always had good discussions, we did have differing opinions on some things, but we were able to actually discuss them ... so I found it easier to let go physically of the equipment, and let go mentally and personally because it didn't matter what my opinion was, someone would appreciate that I had the ability to share my opinion. (Lindsey, personal communication, January 2019)

Building on these ideas of freedom from societal constraints, participants discussed the value in meeting a group of women from different backgrounds with, at times, opposing views. Group discussions formed part of the sessions and although loosely facilitated, these remained open and informal. Several participants voiced the value of being in an environment where they felt able to discuss their views and felt heard, even when they were not all in agreement. The discussions became an important aspect of participants' experiences, which is where recreational or professional circus and social circus initiatives can differ. The emphasis in social circus lies in shared learning and acceptance of difference as opposed to simply the development of physical skills and technique. These ideas of feeling heard and the ability to share opinions without being criticised by peers is particularly relevant today in a society where 'women are encouraged to judge one another, make comparisons with other women and where the media encourages it to be acceptable for women to criticise other women if they do not quite match up to the norm' (Griffiths, 2016, p. 60). In feeling accepted by their peers, regardless of differences in opinion, participants experienced a moment of feeling free of critical judgement. This experience of feeling free led to some participants citing an increase in confidence to 'let go' of the equipment and explore their physical movement, but also to explore ideas of self-image through costume and performance. For example, Lindsey stated that this enabled her to:

'let go of how I looked, by the end I was just like, I just want to wear that [costume], so I don't care that it's the most skin I've ever had on display in a public arena, so I went from completely covered, to not uncovered, but modestly covered and sparkly, you know, and I think for me, that was quite a good thing.' (Lindsey, personal communication, January 2019)

Considering these ideas of mutual support, notions of freedom and the valuing of difference, social aerial circus offered participants a form of 'feminist sociality' (McRobbie, 2009, p. 120). Although several participants viewed the programme as an opportunity to meet new people, quite a few participants indicated that they had no intention of seeing it as a social activity before participation. For these participants it was primarily a means to develop their fitness and digital media production skills. However, they were surprised to find pleasure in the sociality of the practice. One participant stated that the programme had 'dragged a social-ness out of me!'. She said it was the child-like qualities of play and physical freedom that enabled her to forget her adult responsibilities. She stated, 'kind of

the social aspect, of being a child, children just make friends with everyone easily!’ Her comments indicate that she was able to find pleasure in physical movement and enjoy the social experience rather than simply seeing her participation as an individual self-improvement project. Associating her experience with child-like play illustrates that she felt less constrained than she does as an adult, where the element of play enabled her to move more freely as well as experience a sense of social freedom. These findings indicate that social aerial circus in this context can challenge ideas of personal responsibility and individualism by encouraging collectivism and acceptance of difference through shared play and the creation of an environment free from judgement. In this sense participants were able to embody perceptions of circus as an inclusive form of social organisation and ‘an accepting environment that can accommodate anyone’ (Kwint, 2012, p. 222).

### **Identity Exploration and Enactments of Fantasy**

I was sitting in there in a mermaid’s tail just flicking it around! (Laughter). Oddly satisfying, it was doing something that you’d never be in a position to do otherwise, you know, whether like money, or time or, because you wouldn’t even have thought about just sitting around in a mermaid’s tail! (Laughter). But it was nice, it was a different experience that I really enjoyed. (Annie, personal communication, February 2017)

Although ideas of escape and alterity were discussed by participants with regards to their aerial training, the internal performance events came to represent these notions and were an important focus during participant interviews. Spiegel says that ‘Social circus dramaturgy begins with the personal and moves toward a collective expression with themes that are fantastical or exotic (Alice in Wonderland, pirates, gypsies) at least as often as it explicitly explores social issues’ (2016, p. 55). Although social issues, particularly ideas of gender and feminism, were discussed throughout both programmes participants were primarily drawn to the fantastical within their performances. The performance events offered participants an opportunity to dress up in costume and to draw together the movements they had learnt over the course of each programme into a short aerial sequence. Participants felt these events provided a communal celebration of their achievements and described them as ‘the reward for all our, for all our work, that we kind of did that together’ and ‘it almost was like a little celebration of everything that we’ve learnt, and everyone’s [sequence] all came together’. Although not an explicit exploration of social issues, participants’ performances offered an enactment of notions of the female

aerialist as representative of fantasy, glamour and freedom. The aesthetics chosen ranged from the fantastical (Alice in Wonderland, mermaids, and a unicorn), to the glamorous (a flurry of sequins, glitter and pin-up styles), to simple leotards paired with sportswear. Although to a certain degree, participants did conform to typical ideals of feminine beauty through the use of costume and makeup, for the most part the aesthetics chosen were borne out of pure joy and escapism in having an opportunity to indulge in the ridiculous and to play with self-image.

I've always wanted to do aerial silks, I remember being little and going to the circus and seeing a woman spinning down from the ceiling ... it's weird, it made me feel like, I was trying to picture being her, but I felt like, kind of like, free I guess, just, sort of there, doing her own thing, just the way they were all moving around her, and it was just, I wanted to be that person! (Kelsey, personal communication, February 2019)

Kelsey's description of watching an aerial performer builds on current research that has established the somatic experience of watching aerial performance (Tait, 2005a, p. 142, Holmes, 2016, p. 105). According to Holmes, audience members actively imagine themselves performing as the aerialist in both body and mind (2016, p. 105). Several participants commented on their experience of watching female aerialists when they were younger and expressed their desire to 'be that person'. Many participants alluded to these ideas of transformation, whereby their experiences of aerial performance enabled them to momentarily transform their identity. In a discussion of social circus performance Spiegel indicates that 'it is the physicalities and corporeal relationship experienced rather than the narratives illustrated that become the locus of transformation' (2016, p. 55). Building on Spiegel's argument, the importance of the performance within this study does not necessarily lie within the characters or aesthetics chosen, but in the embodied experience of alterity, where participants were able to explore different sides of themselves. Like the participants of Spiegel's study, the performance opportunity for this study's participants 'tapped into corporeal fantasies, desires, and the transformation of identities' (2016, p. 56). Many participants commented that wearing the costumes and performing their sequences in a performative environment enabled them to feel like 'a proper aerial person', 'a real performer' and 'really professional'. In this sense participants could be seen to be demonstrating representations of the female aerialist, actively embodying notions of transformation and strength. Dressing up in costume and character permitted a different lived experience where participants were able to indulge in their chosen fantasy. Bolton

discusses these ideas of self-authorship and argues 'a circus experience can allow young people to revise and re-present themselves, albeit temporarily, as circus acrobats or clowns' (2004, p. 23). Several participants used this opportunity of identity exploration to (re)live elements of their youth that they felt had been lost. One participant chose to don a skeleton leotard and face paint as she wished to (re)experience her gothic look from when she was younger, thus providing a sense of escape from her adult self. She stated, 'But that was I think part of it, I was just like, let me do a little bit of what I did when I was younger'. She wanted to embrace elements of her identity which she had felt compelled to lose in growing older. Similarly, several participants took the performance opportunity to indulge in their mermaid fantasies. Charlie highlighted feelings of glamour and other worldly qualities when discussing her childhood fantasy of being a mermaid. Although she acknowledges this desire is not necessarily a part of her identity, she does say it enabled her to explore a 'more glamorous' side of herself. Her experience of aerial performance allowed her to live out her fantasy. Likewise, Lindsey discussed the pink sequined costume she chose to wear, which she perceived as completely out with her usual style and identity. Bolton argues that circus 'represents a field in which the artists can **self-design** ... Within limits, they can present themselves in any way they want to be revealed' (2004, p. 180, emphasis in original). These experiences of self-design, these embodied feelings of glamour, fantasy and other worldliness became part of participants' 'physic tattoos' of practice (Deri & Mendes, 2012, p. 98). Social science researcher Isabelle Mahy discusses the boundaries between the performer identity and other 'dimensions of the self' (2016, p. 177) implying that these identities become interwoven as one. Participants' performer identity, albeit temporary, became interwoven with their usual identities, as they acted out their chosen fantasies and desires.

I suppose it was just nice to be somewhere on my own, being me, not either at work or with my kid or with my husband and be identified as a wife or a mother, you know. So it was just nice to have a group of people, be a part of a group where I could identify as myself rather than be identified by my relationship to other people. (Lottie, personal communication, 2017)

Participants frequently described their experiences of aerial training, and specifically the performance events, as different to their daily experiences using phrases such as 'so far removed from what any of us do normally' or 'out of my current world experience'. In quite literally turning their perspective upside down through inverting and

twisting their bodies, their aerial training and performance provided a stark contrast to their day-to-day lives. Participants felt that they were able to explore other sides to their identity through their aerial practice and enjoy something that was for them, removed from their typical responsibilities. Participants' responses draw similarities to one of Bunsell's research participants' experience of bodybuilding who is quoted as saying 'I didn't want to be defined for the rest of my life as just a mother. I guess I wanted to take control of my body and my life again and say 'this is me!'' (2013, p. 62, emphasis in original). Similarly, participants of this study expressed their satisfaction in being able to move away from their typical identities and responsibilities of mother, wife, employee, student, if only for a few hours a week. Aerial practice provided for participants a physical escape from their typical lived experiences, enabling a release if only momentarily from the 'mundane day job' (Lindsey, personal communication, January 2019). Several participants commented that their aerial practice provided a sense of relief, where due to the intense level of focus required, they were able to stop thinking about their studies, or work, or other aspects of life. Many participants commented on the programme sessions becoming something in their diaries that they looked forward to each week, a small but valuable chunk of 'me time'. Political philosopher Linda Barclay in the chapter *Autonomy and the Social Self* argues that '[t]raditionally, women's lives have been devoted to the care of others, and if anything, the problem has been to find a space for the expression and pursuit of one's own interests' (2000, p. 59). Along similar lines, Shilling finds that 'feminist work highlighted the fact that women frequently learn to live with what can be termed 'over-burdened bodies'' in putting other's needs before their own (2003, p. 29, emphasis in original). Many participants spoke of feeling guilty for taking time for themselves and, if they did not express feelings of guilt, often discussed finding it difficult to take time away from their work, studies, parenthood or self-improvement projects. Bunsell reveals similar findings where one of her participants commented that 'training time is me time. I can just forget about my worries ... focus on my body and how it moves' and another of her participants stated 'it's my world for an hour or two' (2013, p. 125). Like Bunsell, who argues 'immersion in the process of lifting allows these women to escape from everyday life' (2013, p. 125), immersion in aerial circus training and performance enabled participants an escape from the day-to-day and a means to explore other sides of their identity through physical movement, costume and makeup. In being in a safe and non-judgemental environment supported by peers, participants

found a site in which to play positively with self-image and embody ideas of the female aerialist as an enactment of fantasy.

### **A Social Aerial Circus Programme Engaged with Digital Media Production**

Notions of identity were further explored through participants' use of digital media, which evolved over the course of this study to become a method of documentation for participants, to represent their experiences and an opportunity to play with self-image. Participants were given the option to identify which digital skills they were interested in developing as part of the programme; they chose videography, photography, blogging, graphic and poster design. I organised introductory photography and videography workshops to run in tandem with the physical aerial sessions to enable participants to learn and develop these skills. Participants chose to work towards an internal performance event, rather than a public event, which provided an opportunity to capture video and still images to be used in their editing, blogging, graphic and poster design workshops which took place after the performance events. In this section I draw on interview material and observations alongside participants' digital artefacts created as a result of the digital workshops to discuss participants' representations of their aerial experience and the combination of digital media skills development within a social aerial circus programme. My goal was to explore the role of digital media in participants' aerial training and performance and question if participants' experience of social aerial circus was impacted through this additional discipline.

Participants spoke of the value in combining the two skill sets; they felt that by developing confidence through their aerial practice they felt more confident to explore the digital side of the programme and were more open to learning new skills. Several participants identified the digital arena as a male dominated industry. One participant considered digital technologies 'as more being like something that guys are interested in' and another suggested 'there's a lot of women out there haven't got the confidence to do things in a really male saturated environment, which IT is, and a lot of the digital stuff is'. Participants indicated that by developing their confidence in an environment where they felt safe and free of judgement, they were then able to combine this confidence 'with a new school and new knowledge' (Kelsey, personal communication, February 2019) in their digital learning. By staggering the digital workshops throughout the main study programme, participants' engagement with digital media developed gradually as their self-

confidence grew as a result of their aerial practice. Due to the informality and relaxed atmosphere of the workshops, participants were able to learn at their own pace and under less pressure than other educational environments they said they had experienced. They felt that the digital workshops maintained the same values as their aerial sessions, where participants were appreciated for their individual achievements. Although the digital workshops were led by university colleagues and students, I facilitated these workshops with a similar approach to the social aerial circus sessions. Emphasis was placed on creating a safe and judgement free environment to enable participants to ask questions and encourage group discussion as with the aerial sessions. Whilst social circus initiatives often work with participants to develop a routine to be performed, the concept behind the digital workshops was for participants to create some sort of digital artefact as a result of their participation. Participants' voices are key in leading the direction of group performances and participants often 'engage with a wide range of equipment and skills until the participant discovers the one or two things that they can connect with' (Cadwell, 2018, p. 23) in social circus initiatives. Along similar lines, participants in this study were able to engage with a variety of digital media before selecting the discipline they were interested in as well as the purpose of the workshops for them. Due to the nature of communal learning, participants expressed that they felt less alone in their worries and self-doubt around their digital media capabilities through the realisation that other women were in a similar situation. Participants stated in their interviews that the combination of aerial circus with digital media production skills provided a purpose for engaging with the digital. Many of them commented that they were unlikely to attend a programme focussed solely on digital upskilling; they were honest in admitting they were attracted to the project due to the free aerial circus sessions. However, they saw the digital element as a 'win-win' situation and 'good for them' as they were aware digital skills are desirable for employers. The internal performance events were a key factor in motivating participants to engage with the digital element of project, as this provided an end goal to work towards. These events not only provided motivation for participants to develop their physical practice, but also facilitated a reason for participants to develop their digital media production skills so that they could document their performance experience and capture meaningful material to work with in their follow-up digital workshops. This meant that they had digital images and footage that they felt personally connected to and able to engage with as opposed to using stock images or footage, as illustrated by one participant who said 'you're more



invested in the [digital] project because it's your stuff, as I say, you spend longer making it look right, because it's your work'. This demonstrates that participants felt more engaged with the digital aspect of the programme due to feeling a sense of ownership over the digital images used.

### **Self-perception, Self-authorship and the Digital Image**

When it's something that's quite intimate and you're all, you're all in the same boat, you get involved with each other, like taking the photos of each other doing the stuff, and every week that kind of gives you the boost ... I'd be checking my Facebook and that going, aw are they going to put up any pictures yet [in a private group created for the participants] ... and then you get one that's really good and you're like, ohhh yeah, like [partner's name] look at that, look at that, it's what I did! (Laughter). So it's really nice, so I think that kind of goes hand in hand, I think being able to have something to walk away from it with ... that's almost like your takeaway, it's your souvenir. (Charlie, personal communication, February 2019)

Participants frequently referred to their digital artefacts (photos, videos, posters) as 'souvenirs' or 'keepsakes' of their experience. Like the bodily markings collected in aerial training the digital image provided participants with tangible evidence of their achievements. However, where the bruises and burns may fade the digital artefacts are long lasting. Young argues that women's 'bodily self-reference ... derives from the woman's experience of her body as a *thing* at the same time she experiences it as a capacity' (1977/2005, p. 35, emphasis in original). The digital image became a source of participants' 'bodily self-reference' (Young, 1977/2005, p. 35), which was revealed by participants to enhance their feelings of capacity. Participants' use of the digital image to affirm their experiences raises questions around these notions of the female body as an object on display and ideas of ownership. Alrutz indicates that 'Images and aesthetic engagements can move feelings and not-yet experienced ideas into more concrete, visible, or imaginable forms' (2015, p. 70). She considers the participants of her research and argues that by using digital storytelling they 'transformed elements of their lived experiences into concrete knowledge' (Alrutz, 2015, p. 71). Similarly, with regard to this study, participants' use of the digital image proved to solidify their experiences of aerial circus, enabling them to visualise their lived experiences felt in the body. The use of digital media in this way affirmed participants' feelings of improvement and challenged their feelings of self-doubt, as they could easily compare visuals from the first session to the last and chart their progress. Sociologist Rebecca Coleman argues that 'photographic images produce specific

possibilities for knowing, understanding and becoming a body ... With photographs, then, the becoming of bodies is through a virtual moment in the past which has been captured' (2009, p. 93). Participants' use of both video and photographic images enabled them to capture their bodies within a specific moment of time, allowing them to actualise their experience. The use of the digital image provided tangible visual evidence of participants' progress and development, where they were able to see for themselves their improvement as opposed to being validated by others.

I sent round a few pictures [to colleagues] and they were like, oh my god! Cause you kind of, I suppose, before we started doing it that was my reaction too. You've been doing these amazing things, like, oh my god, that's amazing. And then you start doing it, and it sort of just becomes your thing, and then when somebody else has that reaction to you, like, oh my god, look at you doing that! It feels amazing! It's just like, oh yeah, cause you kind of turned a little bit into somebody who you were just like that to yourself, so it shows you that you too can be like that. (Charlie, personal communication, February 2019)

Participants derived pleasure in seeing themselves in their digital images and in sharing these with peers, disrupting ideas of the female body as purely an object of the male gaze. This notion of finding pleasure in being seen builds on Saarelainen's social circus research, where she discussed participants sharing their images on social media as demonstrating self-satisfaction (2017, p. 51). I do not suggest participants required validation from others but argue that it is in the process of sharing their achievements that participants experienced increased feelings of self-confidence and self-belief by enabling them to see themselves as they felt others did. Through encapsulating their experiences of achievement through the digital image, participants were able to solidify their experiences and view themselves from another's gaze. Rather than seeking praise from others, these ideas return to Annie's notion of 'self-saying' where the use of the image enabled a form of self-induced affirmation. In a discussion of young girls' bodily experiences Coleman argues that the photograph offers young girls a different understanding of themselves compared to mirror images (2009, p. 94). One of Coleman's research participants 'points to how a mirror only shows her body from her own 'perspective' whereas a photograph shows her something 'different' ... showing her someone else's perspective of her body' (2009, p. 94, emphasis in original). In a similar sense Charlie, as previously quoted, discusses her experience of sharing her photographs with her colleagues as enabling her to see herself as others did. She says that by seeing her colleagues' reactions to her photos and

comparing their reactions to her own when she viewed other peoples' images of aerial practice, enabled her to realise that she too could achieve. Another participant commented, in reference to the poster she created, 'of course it makes me feel empowered, because it's like, ha! That's me!' Like Charlie, the use of the photograph to capture a specific moment in time enabled her to view herself from another perspective rather than how she may typically perceive herself. Social and political philosopher Catriona Mackenzie in the chapter *Imagining Oneself Otherwise* discusses the psychic act of visualising the past and indicates that this act of remembering 'often reactivates at least some kind of emotions that we originally experienced and the bodily sensations kindled by them' (2000, p. 126). She continues to argue that the act of remembering has the potential to solidify knowledge as well as remind oneself of the emotions felt at that moment (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 130). Consequently, participants were able to look at their video and photographic images and remember their lived experiences, to reactivate their emotions felt at the time, and to relive to an extent their experiences of aerial circus.

As well as providing participants with a souvenir of their experiences, participants indicated that the integration of digital media production skills with their aerial circus training fostered feelings of self-authorship. One participant, referring to the digital artefacts created, discussed the value in having a tangible output from the experience and stated 'to do the posters and with something that you'd created, you kind of felt a bit more ownership over it, and a bit more, like, quite proud of yourself for doing it as well' (Lucy, personal communication, January 2019). Many participants discussed their satisfaction in having their own individual digital projects they were working on and valued being able to attend the digital workshops relevant to them as opposed to feeling forced into attending something they were not interested in. Likewise, the use of digital self-representation to a certain extent provided an opportunity for participants to critically reflect upon their experience and offered them the opportunity to share their experiences with their family and peers. Dobson argues:

There is evidence from feminist research that mass-media and commercially produced representations often depict women in sexist and demeaning ways ... It is often suggested that perhaps this would be less the case if more women were themselves involved in media production processes (2015, p.11).

Dobson continues to discuss ideas of self-representation within this context as having 'been theorized as potentially "empowering" for girls and women' (2015, p. 11, emphasis in

original). It is these ideas of self-representation that are of interest to this study, where the combination of aerial performance and digital media production enabled participants to engage in the production of their physical aerial body as well as their digital image. Alrutz argues that the combination of applied theatre and digital storytelling enables participants 'to become critically engaged "prosumers," or individuals who create products, ideas, and culture that they wish to consume' (2015, p. 14, emphasis in original). Cadwell draws similarities between social circus and applied theatre and argues that 'the use of theatrical processes and performance with marginalised communities or with communities not normally associated with theatre, can be read as a clear ally of youth or social circus' (2018, p. 20). In the case of this study it is the combination of social aerial circus with digital media that enabled participants to become producers of their self-representations. The physical element, and the internal performance event, permitted participants to choose what to wear and how to present themselves through their movement. The use of digital self-representation enabled participants to choose what elements of their aerial practice were significant to them and how they wanted to present these, be this using photography, video, blogging, or poster design. To an extent, participants had control over their digital creations, as they selected the images and footage they wished to edit and how they wanted to represent their practice. Likewise, participants were able to share their digital creations with their friends and peers, thus meaning to a degree they had control over who viewed their self-representations.

However, it is important to recognise that both programmes' performance events were photographed and filmed by three invited students, who were also there to support participants in producing their own digital documentation. Although participants directed the photographers and videographers by indicating what aerial positions they wished to be captured and how, an element of control was relinquished in having people outside of the group provide much of the documentation used by participants in their digital workshops. Likewise, it is useful to highlight that by working within the framework of a larger funding project, PONToon also has access to participants' images and digital artefacts which may be used by the project for communication purposes with participants' consent. Thus, the environment of the safe, non-judgemental space created within the programmes may not be present if these digital artefacts are used in other contexts and could be given new meaning. However, within the context of the participant programmes the combination of digital media with social aerial circus training and performance offered participants a site

to 'reclaim power from the objectification of women in patriarchal society, by carving out a territory for themselves in which they can revel in their own definitions of beauty and pleasure' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 65). Participants found pleasure in the opportunity to explore fantasy through both the physical body and the digital image, where they were able to play with their own definitions of attractiveness and desire. The digital artefacts created by participants, like their social aerial performances, offered participants a source of personal satisfaction, as opposed to for the viewing pleasure of others. This study has gone some way towards revealing the role of the digital image in affirming participants' experiences where by considering their 'lived experiences through an aesthetic lens' the digital image enabled participants to 'see their experiences in different ways' (Alrutz, 2015, p. 59). The digitally mediated element of the programme informed participants' perceptions of themselves, it reminded them of their capabilities, progress and achievements, which in turn has the potential to prompt embodied feelings of positivity through the act of remembering.

## **Conclusion**

The combination of social aerial circus training and performance with digital media provided a site for participants to play with self-image through the fantasy implicit in both disciplines. Through the creation of a safe non-judgemental space, participants felt able to explore their self-image regardless of societal ideals engaging with notions of circus as a site of acceptance. Participants cited feelings of pleasure in exploring ideas of fantasy and alterity, enabling them to escape from personal responsibilities if only momentarily. Perceptions of the female aerialist as representative of freedom and escape only added to participants' experiences as they embraced the opportunity to explore their fantasies and desires. The use of digital media enabled participants to capture their lived experiences and provided visual evidence of their achievements which had the effect of solidifying their experience. The role of the 'aesthetic lens' (Alrutz, 2015, p. 59) enabled participants to see and construct themselves from another perspective which influenced their ideas of self-perception. The focus on image production as opposed to consumption permitted participants to some extent to have control over the digital images produced, enabling them to take ownership of their self-representations. Unlike other studies on social circus, my goal was to specifically understand participants' experiences of social aerial circus

combined with digital media and question the relationship between these disciplines and self-perception.

## Conclusion

This study set out to engage women with digital skills through social aerial circus. However, in working with participants, the study evolved to explore ideas of female self-perception and identity through the combination of social aerial circus training and performance with digital media production workshops. My cultural and social sphere of circus, cabaret and burlesque is inundated with ideas of empowerment, body ownership and choice, and initially this research was an extension of this. My own experiences of aerial circus led me to focus on ideas of strength and control. Although I maintain these to be important aspects of aerial circus training and performance, what I did not expect to uncover was the role of late modernity and societal expectations in informing and influencing participants' (and my own) relationship to identity and the value of escapism.

This thesis has offered a collective narrative, both my own and participants', to add to the growing body of knowledge about aerial circus and social circus. The findings add to our understanding of female experience of aerial circus within a social circus context taking into consideration media and online culture in late modernity. Within this practice-based research framework, I developed a social aerial circus programme engaged with the cultivation of digital media production skills, where the use of digital media offered a method to consider performer and participant experience. Evidence was gathered through the combination of practice research, drawing upon my lived experience as a practitioner, alongside participant-based studies. Practice research enabled me to explore participants' experiences of aerial circus training and performance using my body as an instrument to prompt critical reflection and explore the theories discussed throughout this thesis. My arguments are informed by the results of participant observation, surveys, group discussions and semi-structured interviews with participants who reflected upon their experiences. Practice research enabled me to connect the embodied experience of aerial circus training and performance to theory. The practice research enabled a physical exploration of the contradictions between female lived experience and representation. The final practice research event demonstrated the body as a site of knowledge through the combination of aerial performance and spoken autoethnography. This final event offered an embodied performance of the collective knowledge developed as a result of this study.

The female aerialist is widely perceived as graceful, elegant and glamorous and moves with ease. Yet, underlying this feminine performance lies typically perceived

masculine qualities of strength, muscle, risk, effort and most likely a collection of 'physical and psychic tattoos' (Deri & Mendes, 2012, p. 98). Participants were highly aware of living within a culture that equates female appearance with capacity and capability, and the role that media plays in enforcing normative expectations, but at times felt at a loss as to how to challenge this. Similarly, they were aware of the levels of judgement placed upon women's bodies, choices and actions. Participants frequently used language such as choice, power and self-reliance with regards to their experience of aerial circus, and in line with neoliberal ideology believed that it was up to the individual to empower themselves. They understood empowerment to be related to ideas of self-confidence and alluded to this as the ability to navigate within the societal pressures they strongly felt.

Dobson discusses her 'ambivalence about the kind of confidence promoted as a key part of femininity in the postfeminist era, as girls and young women are called to embody feminine heterosexiness and also actively differentiate themselves from notions of feminine weakness, passivity, and dependence' (2015, p. 161). Initially, in some respects, this study naively aimed to do exactly this. I believed that aerial training could foster in participants feelings of strength and self-reliance. However, this study reveals that current ideas of femininity and participant identity are more complex than my initial assumptions. Participants' experiences of strength, power, control, self-reliance and confidence as a result of their aerial practice should not be dismissed. Although I agree to some extent with Dobson's 'ambivalence' at this kind of postfeminist confidence, I also argue that it is not an easy act to navigate, not an easy tightrope to walk. Therefore, like Dobson I too 'am influenced by Lauren Berlant's suggestion that many people's interests are "less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it, and meanwhile finding satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies"' (Berlant, 2008 cited by Dobson, 2015, p. 5). Aerial circus enabled participants to find satisfaction with their body's achievements and engage in fantasies of freedom, in allowing themselves to explore their identities, don spectacular costumes, and experience being the glamorous female aerialist if only momentarily.

Participants found pleasure in embracing both the typically considered feminine qualities of aerial performance and aesthetic, alongside perceived masculine qualities of strength, power, and control. Participants were highly aware of such binary perceptions throughout the study, however in some ways rejected society's conventional ideals of feminine beauty in seeking to develop their strength and showing off their collection of bodily imperfections in the form of their bruises and burns. Participants did not necessarily



strive to meet feminine ideals of slimness, although of course their physical fitness was improved through participation, the aerial body with larger shoulders and arms does not truly conform to the homogenised feminine ideal. Through developing their relationship to their bodies, and in turn developing these feelings of being at peace with themselves regardless of how their body looked, participants did in their minds feel liberated as a result of participation.

As with my own experiences of my performance identity, aerial circus provided for participants a means of escape from the day-to-day and a safe space to escape societal pressures, if only momentarily. Participants considered their aerial practice as time for themselves, an opportunity to explore elements of their identity in a safe environment and time away from their usual responsibilities and commitments. The sociality and supportive environment led to participants feeling comfortable to take risks in their self-image and ultimately feel free from judgement, as is so prevalent in current times. Although many participants chose to imitate aesthetics typical of the commercialised female aerialist, I do not wish to detract from their experience, for some participants embracing an overtly feminine performance was different to their normal identity and provided alterity for them. Based on participants' understandings of empowerment, aerial circus provided them with a notional form of transcendence.

To an extent aerial circus does perpetuate ideas of self-improvement. Aerial training does engage in repeated regulation of the body and the development of physical control and self-monitoring. However, in keeping with the notion of circus as a site of acceptance, participants' experiences of social aerial circus, enabled them to work on their bodies in order to achieve physical feats at the same time as appreciating individuality and difference. Participants enjoyed the discipline and control that came with their aerial practice, although did not necessarily feel the need to conform to feminine ideals day-to-day but enjoyed being able to explore these aspects of their identity. Participants valued aerial circus due to the alterity of the practice: it provided them with different experiences to their daily routine. Aerial circus offered participants new lived experiences through physical movement, perpetuating Allegranti's notion that embodiment is a constant state of becoming through the combination of physical life experiences as well as social and cultural (2011/2015, p. 2).

The digital element of the programme emerged to enhance participants' experiences, as it provided for them a mode of reflection, documentation and a means to

share their successes with others. There were times when I thought the combination of the digital image with aerial practice would only serve to perpetuate a focus on aesthetics as opposed to capability where participants were able to edit and curate their self-image and representations of their aerial practice. However, although participants were able to edit their images and videos captured throughout the process, for the most part they chose to portray ideas of progression, escape and fantasy in their self-representations. This combination offered participants 'not just a visual display but an embodied union of empowerment and pleasure' (Bunsell, 2013, p. 64) through engagement of the corporeal experience and self-representation. The use of the digital image enabled participants to view themselves from another perspective which had the effect of consolidating their experiences as the digital artefacts became souvenirs of their lived experiences. The combination of the physical and the digital enabled participants to play with their self-image through self-authorship of both their physical body and their digital image. By selecting, and at times editing, the digital images they wished to share, participants were able to control to some extent how they were viewed. Similarly, they were able to choose how they wished to distribute these images, through personally showing them to peers on their phones and/or sharing on social media platforms, thus to a certain degree they maintained control over who they were viewed by.

However, a number of limitations need to be considered, for instance this study was limited in scope due to a small participant group, who were all white and able-bodied. This research should be expanded to consider a wider demographic and within other geographical locations in order to consider other cultural environments. This could be achieved by collaborating with existing community groups or organisations to engage future participants from other backgrounds. For example, Carter has carried out extensive research into disabled performers and aerial practice (2014, p. 4). Similarly, aerial practitioner Erin Ball works to create adaptive aerial practice 'working with amputees' (Campbell, 2019) demonstrating the adaptability of aerial circus. This study explored the use of digital media combined with social aerial circus within a specific framework; however, it would be useful to compare participants' experiences of media in other contexts where the digital media production element was not facilitated. More research is needed to understand the use of photographic and video documentation in aerial training and performance and the role this plays in experience when not facilitated within a specific programme as with this study. This study moved away from ideas of objectification and

towards ideas of ownership and self-authorship, but I question how media and online culture impacts circus practice outside of this specific context. For example, to compare recreational or professional aerialists' experiences of media and social network usage in relation to their practice, or indeed build on Saarelainen's research (2017) and explore existing social circus participants' experiences of media in relation to their physical practice in more depth. I encourage others to replicate or adapt the programmes created as part of this study to explore the concept of social aerial circus combined with digital media engagement with other demographic groups or within other contexts. The framework could be applied to other performance or community arts practice settings. The funding framework also created boundaries to this research, such as restricting who was able to lead the digital workshops, the need for the programme to take place primarily within the university campus and the equipment we were able to purchase. This highlights social circus initiatives as reliant on external funding sources and support and brings to attention the contradictions discussed by Spiegel (2016) and Sorzano (2017a) of social circus as seen to be fostering ideas of difference and acceptance, yet also encouraging participants towards social integration. Which in the case of this study, as framed by the PONToon project, was through the development of digital skills in order to participate in the digital economy. In considering earlier questions around the validity of social skill development initiatives which do not attempt to address wider inequalities, the concept of combining social aerial circus with training in digital media production did engage women with digital skills. However, this combination has also provided a unique site for participants to reflect upon wider inequalities as part of the process and through group discussion, thus raising awareness of issues such as the lack of jobs in the current economic market, gender inequality in the work place and societal expectations of women.

This research study has proved to be a conflicting experience, both emotionally and physically. In many ways I have had an internal conflict taking place within my body. My physical practice enables me to feel a sense of body ownership and control, however working within large bureaucratic frameworks led to feelings of helplessness and disempowerment. My experience working with participants led to a sense of pride in seeing them achieve and find pleasure in their aerial practice yet working within the hierarchical structure of the institution proved to dampen these feelings. These considerations are also applicable to art and culture and contemporary academia where funding structures often require the fulfilment of a social agenda, where obligations can at times be restrictive or

inhibiting of pleasure. Moving between the position of researcher and performer/instructor circus practitioner in order to carry out this study placed physical and emotional demands on my body. Similarly moving between two different environments over the course of the research has been wearing, moving between the bureaucracy, politics and restraints of the institution and funding system to the open, transparent and supportive safe space of social circus practice. These are considerations that need to be acknowledged in community and physically based research, and indeed many other fields, in considering the emotional labour involved and the conflicting expectations and demands at play.

This study raises questions around the institutional expectations of women who, like men, are asked to perform in more or less gendered ways. McRobbie discusses 'the management of social change and the forms of gender power which operate within an illusion of positivity and progress while locking young women into 'new-old' dependences and anxieties' (2009, p. 10). Social aerial circus offers a metaphor of positivity and progress and highlights the contradictions and internal tensions within neoliberal ideals of capable womanhood through the physical exploration of new expectations (self-confidence, power, and a move away from ideas of female inferiority) as well as traditional expectations of female identity (heteronormative ideas of female beauty and the female body as a visual object). Bessone argues that 'In contemporary neoliberal society, this responsibility to make sense of one's life, searching for or even inventing new forms and sites of belong ... is increasingly assigned to the individual' (2017a, p. 291). Similarly, McRobbie argues that 'Young women are ... dis-embedded from communities where gender roles were fixed ... individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures' (2009, p. 19). In considering the uncertainty and the changing economic landscape that characterise late modernity, social aerial circus offers participants an opportunity to find a sense of belonging, explore changing gender roles and embody ideas of self-reliance. These debates highlight the contradictions explored within this thesis, which discusses ideas of freedom and liberation yet achieved as a result of self-control and individualism inherent in neoliberalism.

Social aerial circus in the context of this study was not overtly subversive *per se*, in that we cannot escape the societal pressures and neoliberal society in which we navigate. However, aerial circus training and performance did momentarily offer participants freedom from social constraints, where they were able to fulfil ideas of physical

independence and notional liberation. Social circus, because of its nature and history, can offer a degree of subversion. Social circus has the potential to fulfil social ends in a way which is not alienating through notions of sociality, collectivism and a celebration of alterity. Short of revolution or at least major socio-political reform, it is impossible to escape neoliberalism and the society in which we live, but by working within the framework it is possible to harness social aerial circus and the use of digital media as a means to play with identity and build a positive self-image. The concept of the social aerial circus combined with digital media has its limitations and it cannot rebalance the current inequalities within which we navigate. What it can do, if only momentarily, is enable changes in self-perception and self-image amongst participants. The combination of the physical and digital can enable participants to see themselves in a new light, to consider themselves differently, and to believe in their own capabilities. This embodied knowledge, inhabits participants' lived experiences and is solidified in the form of their digital souvenirs of physical practice.

I have highlighted the tensions in the field of social circus and brought to the forefront an internal dissonance that is embraced throughout this study. The concept of social contortion has emerged as a metaphor to represent the contradictions and expectations discussed throughout this thesis and embodied in my physical practice. Bessone draws on her fieldnotes to argue 'that circus practitioners have a "very bodily way of interacting, listening, being present"' (2017a, p. 227, emphasis in original). As a circus practitioner I have gained an understanding of how my bodily way of researching, sensing and understanding were integral to this research process in order to explore female lived experience of social aerial circus. This study has impacted upon my recreational aerial and flexibility teaching practice outside of the environment of the participant studies. It has furthered my understanding of students' mental state and the framework and structures within which they navigate. Bessone argues that people 'now appear as much more in need of systems of reference to organise their lives, knowledges and beliefs, and to anchor themselves to broader orders and imaginations' (2017a, p. 291). The parallel practice research/participant approach has enriched my understanding of practice and the potentialities as a circus performer and recreational instructor. The cabaret circus performer can offer the audience an inversion and a critique of normal hierarchies, a lifting of social constraints and a moment of fantasy through performance. The social circus or recreational circus instructor is not just enabling the development of physical or social skills

but acts as a facilitator to help participants to navigate within the contradictions of late modernity, to help them develop self-confidence, explore their own ideas of gender and find a place of belonging in the absence of structured codes and set communities.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Video of final practice research event: a performance seminar, vocal aerial silks performance and multi-media installation**

Exploring Female Identities Through Social Aerial Circus and Digital Media

By Carolyn Watt, technical support provided by University of Portsmouth technicians

Greg Smith, Russ Percy and Jack Doggrell

26th June 2019, University of Portsmouth, White Swan building, Studio 6

Video link: <https://cawatt.wixsite.com/cwattphd/finalpracticeresearch>

This video can also be found on the accompanying memory stick (back sleeve) in folder number 1.

This final practice research video is the primary element to be viewed in conjunction with reading the thesis, however several videos and images created over the course of the research can be found in appendix 3, online and on the memory stick.

## Appendix 2: Script/description of final practice research event

Exploring Female Identities Through Social Aerial Circus and Digital Media

By Carolyn Watt, technical support provided by University of Portsmouth technicians

Greg Smith, Russ Percy and Jack Doggrell

26th June 2019, University of Portsmouth, White Swan building, Studio 6

*Please note: this is not a transcript of the video document. This script represents the text used within the performance seminar and installation, with additional descriptions of the multi-media installation components. Please watch the video in appendix 1 before reading the script.*

[The audience enter the performance installation space. Off centre, a set of red aerial silks are rigged next to a set of white aerial silks. The white silks are printed and embroidered with black text, this text is a selection of participant quotations. Towards the back of the room an aerial hoop, with a piece of lilac aerial silk fabric stretched within the hoop frame, is rigged at head height. Projected onto the fabric within the hoop is a short three-minute video played silently on a loop, this video shows visuals gathered across the research project, including both participant studies and Carolyn's practice research iterations. Rigged next to the aerial hoop is a set of lilac aerial silks which are printed and embroidered with words that represent Carolyn's experience of aerial silks, the same words are spoken by Carolyn in the recorded audio which plays on loop as audience members enter the space. In the far corner, a circular video is projected onto the floor, this video is a fish-eye style video recorded during the pilot study internal performance event, providing an aerial view of the activity. In the opposite corner of the room an aerial loop is rigged above a crash mat, low to the ground to enable attendees to sit in the loop should they choose too. Behind the loop hangs white fabric, with two 360-degree videos projected to show the two camera viewpoints.]





**Figure 6: Watt, Carolyn. "Final event, installation, floor projection."  
June 2019. Video screenshot. (Filmed by Luca Di-Maio)**

Carolyn's recorded voice plays on repeat as attendees explore the space. These are the same words that are printed and embroidered on the lilac aerial silks.

Hold, balance, hang, touch, climb, breath, hold, stay, fall, prep, hold, stretch,  
embrace, miss, keep, lose, support, touch, climb, spin, twist, drop, fly, melt,  
sweat, laugh, press, bend, fold, hold

[Attendees are invited to explore the space and participate in the 360-degree point of view video/aerial experience should they choose to. This experience was filmed during the participant main study and permits users to experience the main study's internal performance event from a participant's perspective performing a short aerial sequence.]



**Figure 7: Watt, Carolyn. "Final event, installation, participant experiencing 360-degree point of view aerial video." June 2019. Video screenshot. (Filmed by Luca Di-Maio)**

Carolyn invites audience members to make themselves comfortable, to sit on the crash mats/chairs available or stand if they wish, she invites them to move as needed throughout the event and to do what feels right for their bodies.

Carolyn plays a video, projected onto a blank wall, and delivers the following text, whilst taking moments to warm up her body.

### **Part 1**

[Warm up wrists and neck]

As an experienced cabaret circus performer and instructor this research emerges from my long-term practice. The concept of the digital aerial circus emerges as a result of my own experiences, the impact circus practice has had on me and the changes I have seen in others.

This research sits within the field of social circus, where circus arts are used as a tool for social transformation, often enabling amongst participants the development of self-confidence and self-belief, where the focus is placed on the process and participation rather than high level skills or polished performance.

The combination of digital media forms with aerial practice, although focussed on digital upskilling, became more about the use of digital as a way of reflecting upon your practice. What the participants spoke about was the digital image becoming a souvenir for them, a memory, visual evidence.

Initially this research was focussed on ideas of empowerment, and it is still about empowerment, but empowerment holds lots of meanings and at times quite different meanings to participants, empowerment has become a very personal thing. Within this project it became about the idea of embodied positivity, that if you achieve something, then that lives within you, you can feel it, and it moves with you, in your body, in your day-to-day. Your circus body is always with you.

## **Part 2**

[Move through the back, cobra, cats, shoulders]

Within this research the body is integral as a site to both store and distribute knowledge. My creative practice is not simply a means of communication, but a means to explore my body as a research tool, gathering data, experiencing, reflecting and sensing.

### ***Bending Over Backwards***

[Butterfly/hip stretch]

Within this performance I was working closely with a small group of women. There was a focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing. We all had our own different anxieties, we were all wrapped up in our different things going on in our lives. I joined this group as means to address my deteriorating mental health at the time, my anxiety was getting to a real low point.

But that collective working together, working towards a common goal, creating this group performance, enabled me to feel celebrated, to feel supported, to feel valued. It was also a very challenging experience, because the show that we were working towards was based on office life, and only two of us had jobs that were primarily based in an office, and they were quite the cause and root of some of our anxieties at the time. And we were having to bring this into our circus, safe,

performance space. Where many of my commercial performances are about ideas of escape, in this this performance I was quite literally performing myself, performing me. My anxiety lives within my body, and I had to work through this within this performance: perform my anxiety.

### ***Be My (Body) Guest***

[Bridge pose, turn notes upside down to read in pose]

This performance piece was really about considering the female aerialist and ideas of the gaze, turning the gaze outward. It was exploring this idea of the feminine masquerade, and strength, and feminine gestures. It was a scratch performance piece and involved lots of different disjointed perspectives through the use of digital media.

The combination of the digital media added different layers, it provided opportunity for reflection and prompted consideration of the performance in a different way. The addition of the projection, the live stream, and 360-degree video experience enabled an exploration of what it is like to be a performer and ideas of being watched, the female body as on display, and what that means. As well as ideas of control, and who's got the power in that sort of dynamic and authorship through both the physical and digital body.

## **Part 3**

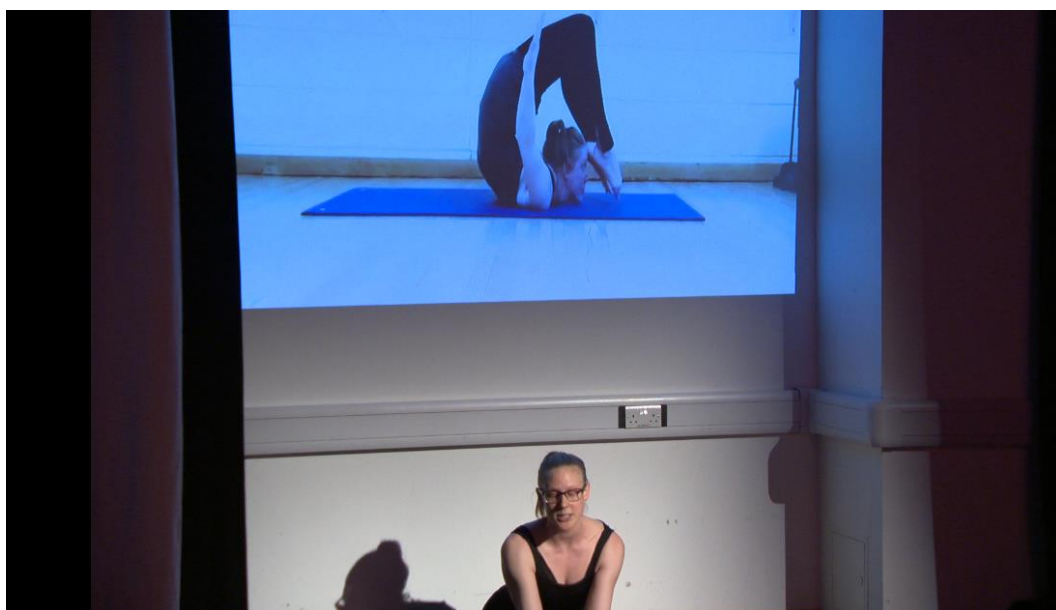
### **Twisted Nymph**

[Straddle sit stretch]

This work led me to reflect upon and consider the role of my performance identity. Twisted Nymph, I suppose is my performance persona, my alter ego as it were. She's really evolved over the 10 years that I've performed, she's evolved as part of my identity, my performance self and Carolyn self, have become intertwined, become one.

Twisted Nymph has enabled me to feel strong and to feel celebrated, to develop a sense of bodily control and explore how this enables me to manage my anxiety. Reorganising my body, and in turn reorganising my mind, connecting my breath,

listening and responding to my body. She's enabled me to become more confident, and embrace my body for what it is, appreciate my body for it can do, what I can do. To build a relationship with my body, and to feel that bodily connection. When I don't physically practice, I lose that connection, almost like I can't feel my body as a whole. Those are the feelings that I lose when I don't train, I don't feel whole, I don't feel like me, like something is missing.



**Figure 8: Watt, Carolyn. "Final event, Carolyn delivering her video presentation/performance, the video is projected onto the wall above Carolyn as she moves through her warm up sequence." June 2019. Video screenshot. (Filmed by Luca Di-Maio)**

Carolyn begins to move towards to red and white silks and then delivers the following text:

When speaking to a circus practitioner at a recent symposium, I told her, her circus body is always with her, it is with her sitting in the symposium, it's with her when she's at her part-time job, she said this made her want to cry. She hadn't considered this before. My circus body is always with me, whether I'm training, or working at my desk, reading, or if I'm with my partner, my family, my friends. My circus body is always with me. And the words I'm about to perform are those of my participants, some of whom are here today, and it might feel a little strange having your own words performed, but these words are our words, these experiences are our experiences, and they live within our bodies.

[A soundscape created by Vida Vojić in response to pilot study interview excerpts begins to play, quietly in the background, integrating sounds of the body such as the breath and heartbeat, alongside vocals.]

Carolyn places her notes down, removes her glasses, removes her dance pants and applies resin to her hands and backs of her knees. She performs an aerial silks piece, performing primarily on the red silks, but placing weight on, and moving with the white silks. She recites and repeats the words printed and embroidered on the white silks, simultaneously moving through her aerial movements.



**Figure 9: Watt, Carolyn. “Final event, vocal aerial performance.”  
June 2019. Video screenshot. (Filmed by Luca Di-Maio)**

Following the physical performance Carolyn invites attendees to join her in watching a short video of the two participant studies, at times she interacts with the video and acknowledges participants’ contribution and support.

The video is projected onto the same blank wall as the previous video, this video combines a selection of participant audio material with moving and still image recorded over the course both the pilot and main studies. This video is in appendix 3.



**Figure 10: Watt, Carolyn. "Final event, attendees viewing the participant programme video." June 2019. Video screenshot. (Filmed by Luca Di-Maio)**

Following the video Carolyn thanks attendees for coming. She asks if there are any comments, questions or feedback from attendees and opens the floor for discussion.

Following a short discussion, Carolyn invites attendees to continue exploring the space should they wish to, to take their time, and to ask any questions they may have.

### **Appendix 3: Visual documentation of iterations of practice research and participant studies**

**Website homepage:** <https://cawatt.wixsite.com/cwattphd/home>

*Be My (Body) Guest*, video playlist: <https://cawatt.wixsite.com/cwattphd/be-my-body-guest> (these videos can also be found on the accompanying memory stick in folder number 2)

*Bending Over Backwards*, images: <https://cawatt.wixsite.com/cwattphd/bending-over-backwards> (these images can also be found on the accompanying memory stick in folder number 3)

Participant studies, video and a selection of participants' digital artefacts:  
<https://cawatt.wixsite.com/cwattphd/participant-studies> (this video and images can also be found on the accompanying memory stick in folder number 4)



## Appendix 4: Pilot study programme

<b>Preparation</b>		
Information sessions, one-to-one or in small groups as appropriate, to invite those interested in participating to discuss the project, what is involved in taking part and talk through the Participant Information sheet, Consent Form and Fitness to Participate Form.		
Questionnaire completion 1, to gather initial data and information for comparison and analysis. To enable a better understanding of participants' needs and interests in relation to aerial circus and digital media in order to adapt the programme accordingly.		
<b>Development and documentation</b>		
All sessions were documented via a combination of video and/or photography, primarily by participants themselves and in response to their interests, these files were shared both in a private Facebook group and in a shared Google Drive to enable participants to document their progress and gather material to use in their digital workshops/as they wished.		
<b>Session</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Focus/purpose</b>
Session 1	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Icebreakers and getting to know each other. Introduction to aerial silks and loop. Discussion on first impressions of aerial circus, expectations, aims and objectives.
Session 2	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Icebreakers and getting to know each other, reflection on first session. Introduction to physical conditioning and climbs, recap of session 1. Discussion on feelings so far.
Session 3	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Icebreakers and getting to know each other, reflections. Recap sessions 1 and 2. Discussion on feelings so far.
Session 4	Digital media discussion	Check ins. Presentation of different uses of digital media in circus performance, opportunity for participants to experience 360-degree video through the use of a Virtual Reality headset. Discussion on what participants are interested in exploring, how/if they wish to engage with digital media within the programme.
Session 5	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on digital session and physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around digital media they may wish to engage with within sessions.
Session 6	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around digital media they may wish to engage with within sessions/direction of project.
Session 7	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on physical sessions to date. Discussion around participants' idea of a final internal performance/photo/video shoot event. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary, working towards sequence development.
Session 8	Digital media discussion	Check ins. Discussion around participants' idea of a final internal performance/photo/video shoot event, what the group would like to achieve, aims and objectives.

Session 9	Digital media discussion Costume trying on session	Check ins. Discussion on participants' final event concept. Opportunity for participants to play with different styles of costume/looks.
Session 10	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on costumes, talk through final event schedule. Physically working towards sequence development/specific movements to capture at the performance event.
Session 11	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Discussion on performance event. Dress rehearsal.
<b>Digital image production</b>		
Session 12	Final internal performance/photo/video shoot event.	Check ins. Opportunity for participants to showcase their sequences and movement to each other in full costume/hair/makeup. One photographer and two videographers invited to capture the event. Participants encouraged to document each other/themselves.
Session 13	Photo editing workshop	Check ins. Photo editing workshop using Adobe Photoshop, teaching participants how to edit their own photographs.
Session 14	Video editing workshop	Check ins. Video editing workshop using Adobe Premiere Pro, teaching participants how to edit their own videos.
Session 15	Video editing workshop	Check ins. Video editing workshop using Adobe Premiere Pro, teaching participants how to edit their own videos.
<b>Conclusion</b>		
Questionnaire completion 2, to gather data and information for comparison and analysis.		
One-to-one informal semi-structured interviews conducted with participants.		
Short video documenting the pilot study created using material gathered over the course of the programme and shared with participants for feedback/input before finalising.		

## Appendix 5: Main study programme

<b>Preparation</b>		
Information sessions, one-to-one meetings with those interested in participating to discuss the project, what is involved in taking part and talk through the Participant Information sheet, Consent Form and Fitness to Participate Form.		
Questionnaire completion 1, to gather initial data and information for comparison and analysis. To enable a better understanding of participants' needs and interests in relation to aerial circus and digital media in order to adapt the programme accordingly.		
Introduction session, to enable participants to meet each other for the first time in an informal setting, opportunity to watch pilot study video to gain a better understanding of the project, opportunity to meet one of the pilot study participants and ask her questions about taking part, presentation of <i>Be My (Body) Guest</i> and opportunity for participants to experience 360-degree video through the use of a Virtual Reality headset. Discussion on what participants are interested in exploring, how/if they wish to engage with digital media within the programme.		
<i>Participants began in two groups of 5.</i> <i>Group A</i> <i>Group B</i> <i>As 2 participants left the study due to personal reasons, the groups were able to join late September as a group of 8. 8 was the maximum number possible per aerial session due to space and equipment restrictions as well as safe instructor/participant ratio.</i>		
<b>Development and documentation</b>		
All sessions were documented via a combination of video and/or photography, primarily by participants themselves and in response to their interests, these files were shared both in a private Facebook group and in a shared Google Drive to enable participants to document their progress and gather material to use in their digital workshops/as they wished.		
<b>Session</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Focus/purpose</b>
Session 1  Group A Group B	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Icebreakers and getting to know each other. Introduction to aerial silks, loop and hoop. Discussion on first impressions of aerial circus, expectations, aims and objectives.  <i>Capture one group's initial thoughts on video.</i>
Session 2  Group A Group B	Aerial circus session n and group discussion	Check ins. Icebreakers and getting to know each other, reflection on first session. Introduction to physical conditioning and climbs, recap of session 1. Discussion on feelings so far.  <i>Capture one group's initial thoughts on video.</i>
Session 3  Group A Group B	Digital media workshops - Introduction to photography - Introduction to videography	Check ins. One workshop as a basic introduction to photography, different types of cameras and how you use your phone and one workshop as a basic introduction to videography, different types of cameras and equipment.
Session 4 Group A Group B	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on digital workshops and physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around digital media they may wish to engage with within sessions, goals and aims moving forward.
Session 5 Group A Group B	Digital media workshop - Introduction to photography #2	Check ins. Follow on photography workshop with a focus on the difference between photography in a studio and external setting, aim to capture a professional headshot which could be used in

		future editing sessions, focus on use of studio lighting and how to use smart phones as well as digital cameras, how to use editing apps also if unable to access other software.
Session 6 Group A Group B	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on digital workshop and physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary.
Session 7 Group A Group B	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around digital media they may wish to engage with/direction of project.
Session 8 Group A Group B	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around the concept of a final internal performance/photo/video shoot event, what the groups would like to achieve, aims and objectives.
<i>Group A and B merge into one larger group 2 participants left the study due to personal reasons, leaving a remaining 8 participants.</i>		
Session 9	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Introductions, now that the groups have joined. Reflection on physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around digital media workshops they may wish to engage with/direction of project.
Session 10	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around the concept of a finale internal performance/photo/video shoot event, what the groups would like to achieve, aims and objectives.
Session 11	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on physical sessions to date. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary. Discussion around the concept of a final internal performance/photo/video shoot event, what the groups would like to achieve, aims and objectives.
Session 12	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Group discussion on ideas of femininity, feminism and what it means to be a young woman in current times, large sheets of paper provided for participants to note thoughts throughout the session. Building up physical movement/aerial vocabulary.
	Digital workshop - 1-hour introduction to videography	Two University of Portsmouth colleagues led an introduction to videography workshop and how to use your phone to capture video footage.
Session 13	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Reflection on digital workshop and physical sessions to date. Opportunity for participants to play with different styles of costume/looks. Physically working towards sequence development/specific movements to capture at the performance event. Large sheets

	Digital workshop - 1-hour introduction to 360-degree video making	<p>of paper provided for participants to note thoughts throughout the session as in the previous session.</p> <p>Two University of Portsmouth colleagues led an introduction session to 360-degree video making.</p>
Questionnaire completion 2, to gather data and information for comparison and analysis. To enable a better understanding of participants' needs and interests in relation to aerial circus and digital media in order to adapt the programme accordingly moving forward.		
Session 14	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Group discussion on challenges and opportunities as a young woman in Portsmouth, large sheets of paper provided for participants to note thoughts throughout the session. Opportunity for participants to play with different styles of costume/looks. Physically working towards sequence development/specific movements to capture at the performance event.
Session 15	Aerial circus session and group discussion	Check ins. Rehearsal for performance event. Video recorded discussion on experiences to date, thoughts on the programme and ideas around gender.
<b>Digital image production</b>		
Session 16	Final internal performance/photo/video shoot event.	Check ins. Opportunity for participants to showcase their sequences and movement to each other in costume/hair/makeup. One photographer and two videographers invited to assist in capturing the event. Participants encouraged to document each other/themselves.
Session 17	Video editing workshop	Check ins. Video editing session using Adobe Premiere Pro, teaching participants how to edit their own videos. Led by two University of Portsmouth colleagues.
Session 18	Photo editing workshop	Check ins. Photo editing session using Adobe Photoshop, teaching participants how to edit their own photographs. Led by one University of Portsmouth student.
Session 20	Graphic design/poster design workshop	Online video to watch ahead of session, created in collaboration with a colleague as an introduction to graphic design. Check ins. Workshop on graphic design using images/photos to create their own poster, using Adobe Photoshop. Led by University of Portsmouth colleague.
Session 21	Blogging workshop	Check ins. Workshop on creating a blog on your experiences using WordPress. Led by one University of Portsmouth colleague.
Session 22	360-degree video workshop	Editing 360-degree video using Adobe Premiere Pro, teaching participants how to edit their own 360-degree videos. Led by one University of Portsmouth colleague.
<b>Conclusion</b>		

Questionnaire completion 3, to gather data and information for comparison and analysis.
One-to-one informal semi-structured interviews conducted with participants.
Short video documenting both the pilot and main study created using material gathered over the course of the two programme and shared with participants for feedback/input before finalising and showcased at PhD final practice research event.
Informal meet-up organised for participants to come together if they wished.

## Appendix 6: Favourable ethical opinion confirmation: pilot study



13<sup>th</sup> June 2017

### Faculty of the Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee

#### **FAVOURABLE ETHICAL OPINION**

Study Title: **Social circus enhanced by digital technologies to foster female empowerment.**

Reference Number: **Carolyn Watt - Version 2**

Date re-submitted: **8<sup>th</sup> June 2017**

Thank you for resubmitting your application to the Faculty Ethics Committee and for making the requested changes/clarifications.

It is a very clear and concise application.

I am pleased to inform you that the CCI Ethics Committee was content to grant a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions (See Annex B).

Please note that the favourable opinion of CCI Ethics Committee does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

Wishing you every success in your research.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Catherine Teeling'.

Catherine Teeling

## Appendix 7: Favourable ethical opinion confirmation: main study



27<sup>th</sup> April 2018

### Faculty of the Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee

#### FAVOURABLE ETHICAL OPINION

##### ETHICAL REVIEW – QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

**Study Title:** Social Circus incorporating digital technologies to foster female empowerment.

**Reference Number:** Carolyn Watt

**Date submitted:** 11<sup>th</sup> April 2018

**Version Number:** Version 2 - response to FO letter with conditions

Thank you for resubmitting your application to the Faculty Ethics Committee for ethical review in accordance with current procedures.

CCI Ethics Committee was content to grant a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis of your commitment and rigorous responses to the conditions described in the previous FO letter with conditions dated 17<sup>th</sup> March 2018 and in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions (See Annex B).

Please note that the favourable opinion of CCI Ethics Committee does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

Wishing you every success in your research

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine Teeling".

**CCI Faculty Ethics Committee**



13<sup>th</sup> June 2018

### **Faculty of the Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee**

#### **FAVOURABLE ETHICAL OPINION**

**Study Title:** Social Circus incorporating digital technologies to foster female empowerment.

**Reference Number:** Carolyn Watt - FCCI 2018-009

**Date amendment submitted:** 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018

**Version Number:** Version 3

Thank you for submitting the Notice of Substantial Amendment document and revised application to the Faculty Ethics Committee for ethical review in accordance with current procedures and for making the requested changes/ clarifications.

I am pleased to inform you that under chairs action the CCI Ethics Committee was content to grant a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions (See Annex B).

Please note that the favourable opinion of CCI Ethics Committee does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research/ work. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

#### **Advisory Notes:**

1. The final date on the application form is for 7<sup>th</sup> March 2018, did you intend this, and should it not be changed to 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018?
2. In addition please amend the version number in the notification of substantial document it does not tally with the application version.

Wishing you every success in your research

#### **CCI Faculty Ethics Committee**

*Catherine Teeling (Arch) – Chair CCI Ethic Committee*

*Natalie Long (CT) – Deputy Chair CCI Ethics Committee*

## Appendix 8: Declaration of ethical conduct of research: Form UPR16

### FORM UPR16


#### Research Ethics Review Checklist

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information)



<b>Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information</b>		<b>Student ID:</b>	841032
<b>PGRS Name:</b>	Carolyn Watt		
<b>Department:</b>	School of Art, Design and Performance, Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries	<b>First Supervisor:</b>	Marius Kwint
<b>Start Date:</b> (or progression date for Prof Doc students)	October 2016		
<b>Study Mode and Route:</b>	Part-time <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MPhil <input type="checkbox"/> PhD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MD <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Title of Thesis:</b>	Social Aerial Circus: Female Experience, Self-perception and Self-Representation		
<b>Thesis Word Count:</b> (excluding ancillary data)	36, 627		
<p>If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study</p> <p>Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).</p>			
<b>UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:</b> (If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: <a href="http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/">http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/</a> )			
a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Candidate Statement:</b>			
I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)			
<b>Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):</b>		Pilot study: Faculty of the Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee, reference number: Carolyn Watt - Version 2	

UPR16 – April 2018

		Main study: Faculty of the Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee, reference number: Carolyn Watt and Substantial Amendment reference number: Carolyn Watt - FCCI 2018-009
If you have <i>not</i> submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:		
<div></div>		
Signed ( <i>PGRS</i> ):		Date: 08/07/2019

## **Appendix 9: PhD PONToon Contribution Statement**

*Professor Joan Farrer, from the University of Portsmouth, Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, Principal Investigator of the PONToon project (Partnership Opportunities using New Technologies fostering sOcial and ecOnomic inclusioN) June 2017 – November 2020.*

This statement identifies the contribution of the PhD candidate's Social Aerial Circus and Digital Media research to the PONToon project. This statement is indicative of the direct impact of Carolyn Watt's PhD research to date; however, the PONToon project runs up to November 2020 and more synergies will emerge as the project activities come to an end.

- The PhD candidate's practical aerial circus programme combined with digital media production workshops informed PONToon workshops with beneficiaries on different subjects using digital technologies, e.g. film, audio, photography and social media to enable participants to explore and be exposed to a range of digital possibilities.
- The PhD candidate's workshop methods incorporating digital media technologies were used by project partners as a way to increase levels of self-confidence and digitally upskill to increase future employment opportunities.
- The mixed methods were analysed and transferred between the PhD research and the PONToon project (a longitudinal research study). Such as the PhD candidate's development of ethics submissions, risk assessments, consent forms and participant information sheets. Also, traditional qualitative methods such as participant interviews, observation, discussion, survey, user testing, documentation of reflective thinking and content analysis were employed by the PONToon project. Qualitative methods also used by the PONToon project included case study, participatory research, practice-based research, autoethnography and discourse analysis.
- The PhD research tested the efficacy of digital workshops with a range of positive outcomes, allowing the PONToon project to learn from the PhD and see it as an inductive research model, where data and methodologies were tested simultaneously to inform the hypothesis for the PhD candidate and for the project. The hypothesis from the PONToon project's perspective is that a lack of digital skills is disabling women from joining the workforce.

- The testing of the digital workshops within the PhD research allowed the PONToon project to successfully focus on what would be relevant to the wider survey of partners and participants. Successful workshops included digital photography, graphic design skills and videography. The PONToon project incorporated and adapted these primary workshops into the PONToon Festival (August 2019, Portsmouth, UK) in the form of professional photo editing for business, professional video workshops for business, understanding your professional self and cybersecurity/personal digital safety.
- Testing of the PONToon digital applications and application development took place during the PONToon Festival workshops, the successful format developed from the PhD research methods was the informal 'show, tell and use' discussions. This method was repeated in France and the UK at cross-border events.
- The PhD research directly contributed to a number of PONToon project work packages and deliverables which included: developing a community of learners, capturing participants' experiences, data production, experiential learning, films to highlight female experience, social media engagement and survey design.
- Finally, the PhD candidate's conclusions from the participant-based research, supported by scholarly literature, are mirroring directly those of the PONToon project participant findings, where self-confidence and ideas of empowerment are key.

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### **Circus and digital performance events attended/cited**

- Alula Cyr. (2018). Hyena. In (pp. Contemporary circus show). Brighton UK: The Old Market.
- AΦE. (2017). WHIST. In (pp. Interactive theatre and virtual reality event). Brighton UK: The Old Market.
- BandBazi presents B.Collective. (2019). Office Politics. In (2nd ed., pp. Social circus show). Brighton UK: Brighton Spiegeltent.
- Barely Methodical Troupe. (2019). Shift. In (pp. Contemporary circus show). Brighton UK: The Old Market.
- Cave-Walker, D., Lymi, E.-M., Pasquet, M., Cave-Walker, R., Huzel, I., & Little, G. (2018). Fauna. In (pp. Contemporary circus show). Brighton UK: Theatre Royal Brighton.
- circoPitanga. (2019). Circus. In (pp. Contemporary circus show). Brighton, UK: Brighton Spiegeltent.
- Cirque de Demain. (2017). Les Spectacles. In (pp. Competitive circus event, traditional and contemporary acts). Paris France: Cirque Phenix.
- Compagnie XY. (2017). Its Not Yet Midnight. In (pp. Contemporary circus show). London UK: Roundhouse.
- Coney. (2017). Remote. In (pp. Interactive digital theatre event). Portsmouth UK: New Theatre Royal.
- Dubois, E. (2018). No Show. In (pp. Contemporary circus show). London UK: The Roundhouse.
- Flip FabriQue. (2016). Catch me! (Attrape Moi). In (pp. Contemporary circus show). Brighton UK: Brighton Dome.
- Gemini Pole Studio. (2019). Pole Circus. In (pp. Contemporary circus/dance show). Brighton UK: Sweet Werks.
- Jack the Dog. (2019). Scattering Salt. In (pp. Immersive theatre show incorporating digital technologies). Brighton UK: Old Police Cells Museum Brighton Town Hall.
- Mercurali, S. (2017). Macondo. In (pp. Interactive digital theatre event). Portsmouth UK: New Theatre Royal.
- Metta Theatre. (2017). Jungle book: the streetdance spectacular. In (pp. Contemporary dance/circus show). Worthing UK: Connaught Theatre.
- Motionhouse. (2017). Scattered. In (pp. Contemporary dance show incorporating digital technologies). Portsmouth UK: New Theatre Royal.

- Multiple artists. (2019). Night of Serious Circus. In (pp. A number of politically engaged circus acts/show excerpts). London UK: Jacksons Lane.
- Multiple artists. (2017). vrLAB. In (pp. A number of digital and immersive experiences, games and performances). Brighton UK: The Old Market.
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- Murphy, L. (2019). In Night of Serious Circus. In (pp. A number of politically engaged circus acts/show excerpts including *Contra*). London UK: Jacksons Lane.
- No Fit State Circus. (2018). Lexicon. In (pp. Contemporary circus show). Brighton UK: Hove Lawns.
- O'Dare, D. (2017). Rise. In (pp. Physical theatre/contemporary circus show). Worthing UK: Pavilion Theatre.
- Reckert, N., & Morreau, M. (2018). Natalie Inside Out. In (pp. Contemporary circus show incorporating digital technologies). London UK: Jacksons Lane.
- Secret Cinema. (2017). Moulin Rouge. In (pp. Interactive and immersive film event). London UK: Secret Cinema.
- Vertical Exchange Performance Collective. (2017). The Story of You & I (A Trilogy). In (pp. Contemporary theatre interactive experience). Brighton UK: Brighton Fringe Festival.
- Wilkinson, S. (2018). Whilst The Rest Were Sleeping. In (pp. Transmedia immersive digital event). Brighton UK: The Old Market.